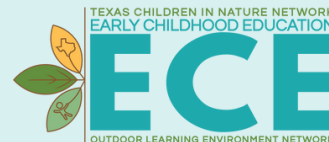




Unleashing the Power of Nature: A Guide to NLI's 12 Best Practice Indicators for Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments (OLEs)



Transform your outdoor areas into thriving learning landscapes!

The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) offers a roadmap for creating enriching and sustainable OLEs. These 12 Best Practice Indicators will guide you in designing a space that sparks curiosity, ignites imagination, and supports the holistic development of young learners. As an ECE Outdoors member, you have access to supportive webinars, videos, newsletters, and field trips to help you along the way! Take a look at the design elements. Where will you begin?

1. 10 or more play and learning settings. These spaces can include mud kitchen areas, sand and water play areas, gardens, loose parts zones, climbing areas and creative arts space.
2. A looping, curvy, primary pathway encourages movement throughout the space and wheeled-toy use.
3. provide a grassy area for games, activities, and events for 25 or more children.
4. Add sufficient shade structures and trees to cool the space and offer shade.
5. Create space for and supply a variety of natural, loose materials present and accessible for children to play with them.
6. Add different types of wheeled toys, portable play equipment, and play props. Make these items accessible for children to use in their play.
7. Ensure sufficient gross motor activities supported by the OLE. This might be stump walks, logs and low boulders for climbing and balancing.
8. Plant as many trees as possible. Trees cool spaces, support good air quality and offer shade.
9. plant trees that are edible fruiting species.
10. Plant shrubs (including fruiting shrubs and vines). This offers loose parts, places for children to hide and offers a sensory rich experience. Add a pot of herbs to a mud kitchen area and watch the magic happen as children explore!
11. There is a designated vegetable garden with sufficient produce for snacking and/or meals. Gardening encourages healthy eating habits and children gain a valuable understanding of where food comes from and how it is grown.
12. There is an outdoor classroom/program base/storage available.

Remember: Even a small space can be transformed! Start by incorporating a few key indicators and gradually add more as resources allow.



Breathe Deep, Teach Green: Unleashing the Power of Outdoor Learning Environments (OLEs)

Feeling overwhelmed? You're not alone! The Outdoor ECE Network is here to help! Outdoor learning contributes to the holistic development of the children in your care. Imagine a learning environment that extends beyond four walls, where nature becomes your co-teacher. This is the magic of OLEs!

Here's why they're a game-changer:

- **Boosts Engagement & Motivation:** Fresh air and natural surroundings spark curiosity and a sense of wonder. Children are free to guide their own learning and explore their interests.
- **Natural Curriculum Integration:** From planting seeds to observing insects, OLEs provide endless opportunities to connect learning with real-world experiences in science, math, language arts, and more!
- **Movement is Medicine:** Active play outdoors reduces stress hormones and improves focus. Fewer behavior issues to manage and more time to engage with the children.
- **Unleash Creativity & Problem-Solving:** Open-ended play with natural materials like sticks and stones encourages imagination, collaboration, and critical thinking skills.
- **Renew Your Energy:** Time outdoors benefits you too! A change of scenery and the calming effects of nature can help reduce teacher burnout.

Making it Work: Simple Steps to Success

- **Start Small:** Don't feel pressured to create a complete outdoor classroom overnight. Begin with one area of your designated outdoor space or incorporate outdoor activities into existing lessons.
- **Focus on Play:** Let children explore freely. Their natural curiosity will lead to rich learning experiences and opportunities for meaningful connection together.
- **Observe and Adapt:** Use outdoor time to informally assess children's development and adjust lesson plans to meet children's interests and needs.
- **Embrace the Network:** Collaborate with colleagues, fellow ECE educators, and experts to create and maintain your OLE.

Remember, OLEs are not meant to be stressful! They are a valuable tool to enhance your teaching practice, support children's development, and create a more joyful learning environment for everyone. So, step outside, take a deep breath, and utilize your Outdoor ECE Network resources!