



# Outdoor & Nature Play

**A Driver of Child Development**

Support Child Development  
while spending time at the  
Somerville Community Growing  
Center

**Siobhan O'Reilly OT/s**

# Child Development

The CDC groups childhood milestones into four categories

**Social Emotional**

**Language  
Communication**

**Cognitive**

**Movement**

Children begin development in these areas before birth and continue to develop throughout childhood. Developmental areas are broken down into milestones by age. Children can gain the skills needed to meet milestones through play

[Click here to learn more about developmental milestone](#)

**Development is supported by Play!**

(CDC, 2024)

# What is Play to a Child?

- Play is a primary occupation throughout childhood

Play is...

Chosen by  
the Child

Fun and  
Joyous

About the  
Process and  
not the Result

An Occupation is  
the meaningful  
daily tasks people  
participate in

Play is a right for  
all children

Play supports all  
aspects of child  
development

# Healthy Positive Risks

A Risk is an opportunity for growth



Opportunity for Risky Play is on the decline

Kids who perceive their play is not risky enough may seek risk elsewhere

- Physical play that is exciting and challenging with the potential to cause injury
- Extend the benefits of outdoor play
  - Reduces the risk of phobias and anxiety
  - Risk management
  - Self regulation
  - Problem solving skills

## Risky Play

- Climbing a tree
- Carrying heavy sticks and rocks
- Jumping from a height
- Walking across a log
- Challenging playground equipment

# Child-Led Play

## And the Role of Adults



- Child determines the who, what, where, when, and why
- Ensures meaningful play that develops skills
  - Leadership
  - Decision making
  - Sense of self importance

### Child Led Does Not Mean Adults are Not Involved!

- Let the child show/tell you what interests them and base your activities off of that.
- Ask questions about what the child is doing/playing to further their learning/play

Play is how children interact with the environment, so the **environment matters...**

# Outdoor Play

## And When Does it Become Nature Play?

### Outdoor Play

- Any play that happens outside
- Can include play structures and toys
  - playgrounds, sports practices, recess at school, playing tag
- Both structured and child-led play

### Nature Play

- Play that includes the natural elements
  - Sticks, rocks, dirt, natural water sources, plants, etc.
- Nature Play can be found anywhere nature is!

### Why Bring Play Outside?

- Opportunity to explore and learn about our world
- Unique play experiences
  - fresh air
  - sunlight
  - natural elements
  - changing play environments
- Opportunity for challenges and positive risks

### A Chance for Child Development!

**Recommended kids  
play outside 2-3  
times per day**

**Let's get into  
Development!**

# Outdoor Play is Sensory Play

Outdoor play and can help prevent near sightedness. There is also so much to look and talk about.

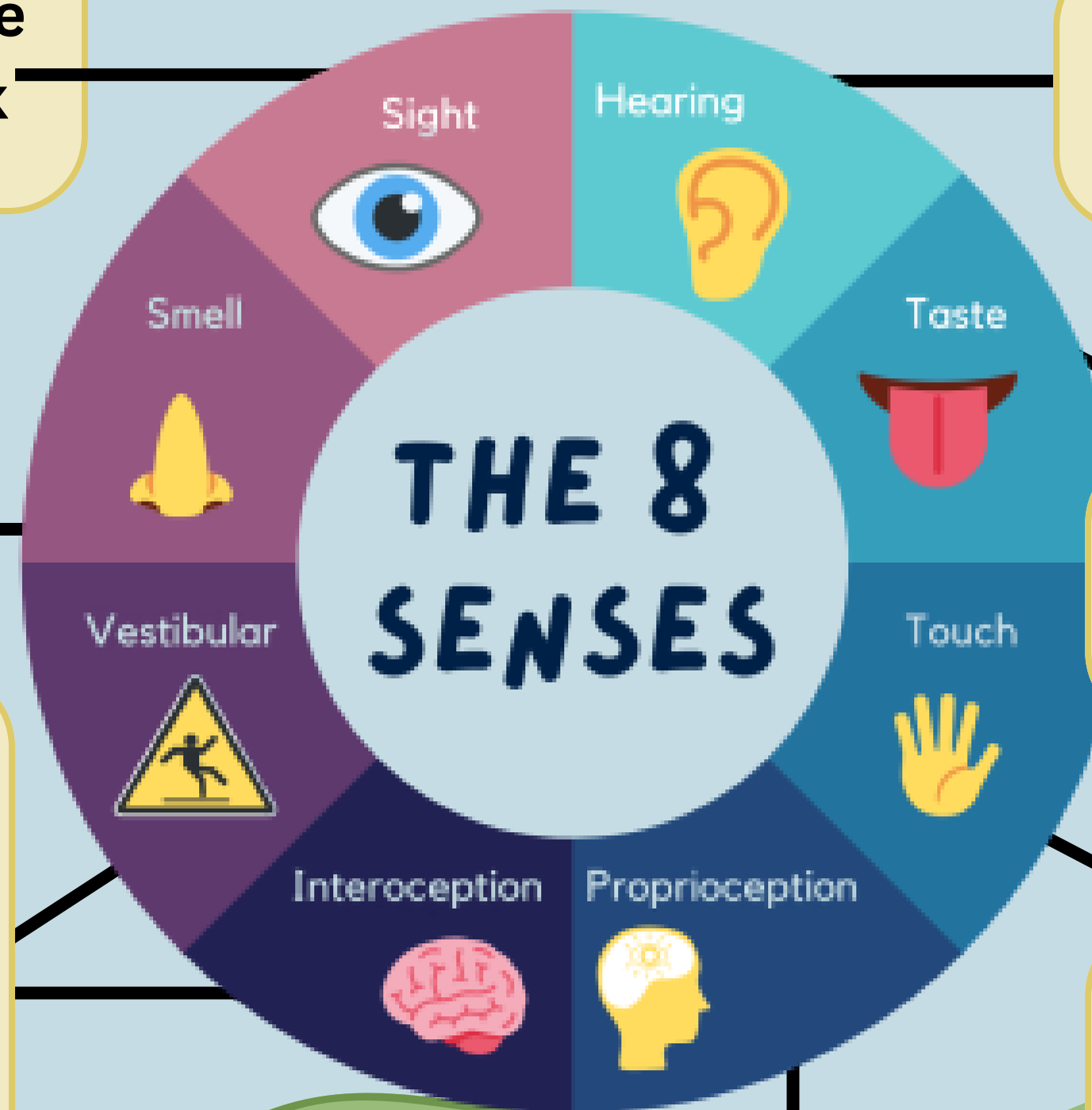
Sounds of wind, birds, crunching leaves, etc. Ask children what they hear!

Weather, plants, dirt, all have smells. Ask children to describe what they smell

Learn about edible plants! Sharing a meal or snack outside is a great way to get outdoors!

Moving through the environment and taking positive risks with their bodies helps kids with body and space awareness. Outdoor play also contributes to understanding our body sensations better.

Everything has a unique feel! Encourage kids to touch, explore, and get a little messy!



# Social-Emotional



- **Increased Joy & Positivity:** Children engaged in nature free play are observed laughing and smiling more than during structured play, contributing to more positive social outcomes.
- **Enhanced Pro-Social Behaviors:** Access to green spaces is linked to improved social skills and cooperation.
- **Child-Initiated Social Interactions:** Outdoor play encourages children to engage with peers more spontaneously.
- **Sustained Social Play:** Being outside motivates children to prolong social play, fostering stronger relationship skills.
- **Conflict Resolution & Rule Negotiation:** Children develop skills in resolving conflicts and collaboratively setting play rules.
- **Empathy:** Nature play promotes perspective-taking and the ability to read body language effectively.
- **Confidence & Self Esteem:** Opportunities for child-led and risky play builds children's awareness of their own skills and interests. Opportunity for autonomy.



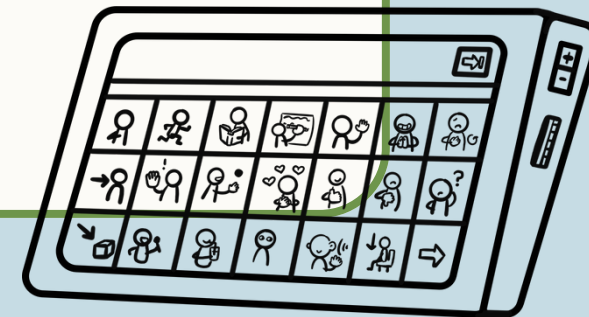
# Language & Communication

Play and the outdoor environment are great contexts for children to develop their language and communication. The multi-sensory outdoors encourage the use of language and allows kids to question, wonder and theorize about their world. Pretend play, especially outdoors, encourages social and expressive language!



## Social Communication

- Social interactions motivate language use
- Sharing co-constructed ideas with peers
- Negotiating



## Expressive Language

(communicating thoughts, feelings, & Ideas)

## Asking & Answering Questions

- How do I climb the tree?
- Why is the sky blue?
- When does it get warm?
- Can I go play?



- Imaginative play promotes the use of language
  - Communicating rules, stories, and scenarios
- Describing what they feel, see, and do
- Real life use of vocabulary: science, nature, and sensory words
- Spatial Language: up, down, across, under, above

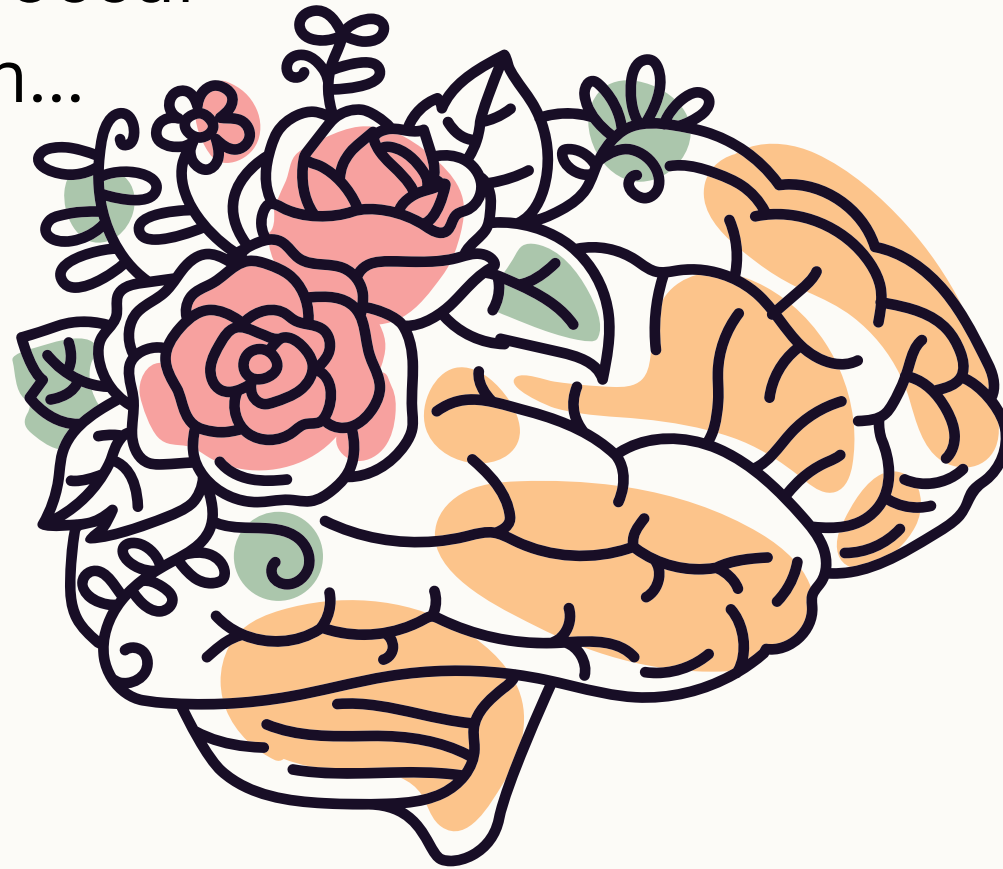


# Cognitive

## Complex Thinking

Imaginative play, which is likely to occur outdoors, helps to develop skills in...

- Problem Solving
- Representational Thinking
- Perspective Taking
- Creativity
- Cause and Effect



## Executive Functioning

Executive functions are those that are commonly associated with school readiness and success!

- Memory
- Flexible Thinking
- Attention
- Planning
- Goal Setting

**Physical activity  
influences brain  
development!**

The sensory rich environment of the outdoors works to create meaningful memories and learning opportunities, that strengthen cognitive skills.

# Physical Movement

**Chances for Healthy Physical Risks! Kids can experiment with their bodies and practice physical skills**

**Children are more physically active outside compared to indoor play**

**Learn coordination and strength needed to complete tasks**

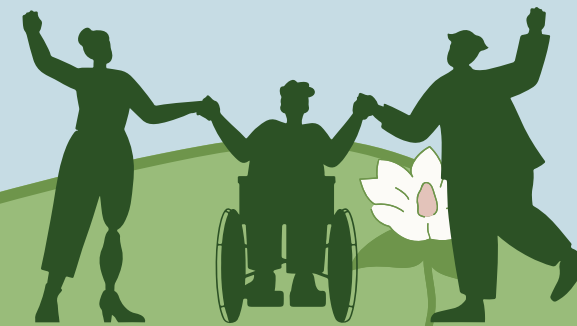
**Relationships to physical activity in childhood predict future adult relationship**

**Being outdoors gives children the space to move their bodies**

**Changing outdoor environment creates new ways for children to challenge their bodies**

**Run, Jump, Balance, & Climb! So many ways to move your body**

(Hanscom, 2016) (Dankiw et al., 2020)



# Time Outdoors Benefits Everyone!

**Adults benefit from spending time outdoors too!**

- Improved thinking and reasoning
- Physical health
- Improved mental wellness



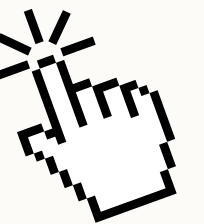
# Somerville Community Growing Center

Play at the  
Somerville  
Community  
Growing Center!!

**An Opportunity for Outdoor and Nature Play !**

**The SCGC offers opportunities for outdoor and nature play. The garden is a space that has toys to be played with but also a plethora of natural elements for children to explore. Free play and directed play events offered year round.**

**Child in Nature Initiative**

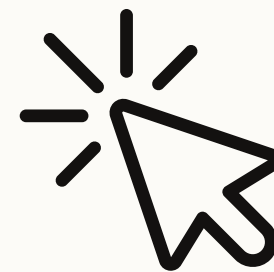


**SCGC Calendar**



# Resources

- Balanced and Barefoot- Angela J. Hanscom
  - Book written by an occupational therapist highlighting the importance of outdoor/nature play
- Infographic on Heavy Work
- Infographics on outdoor play in All Weather
- Learn more about CDC developmental milestones
- Ideas on how to play outside
  - Sensory Play
  - Nature Play
- Somerville Community Growing Center
- Somerville parks and outdoor spaces



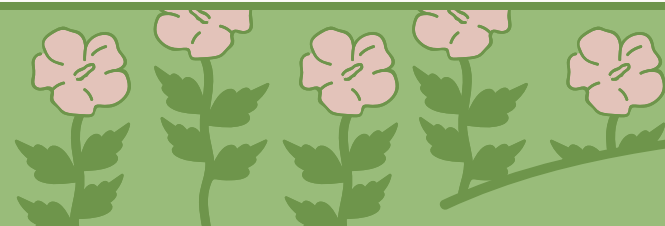
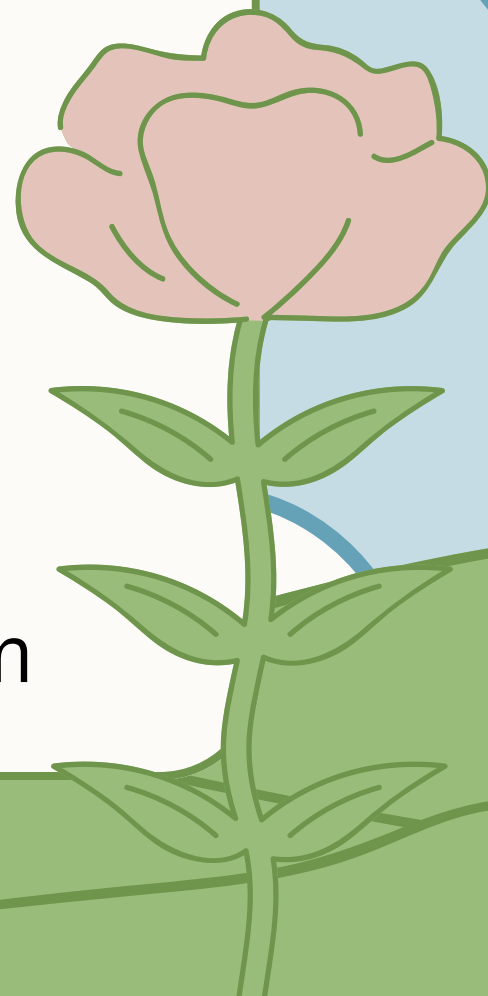
# Thank You!

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