

Chapter 3: OUTDOOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Purpose Of These Requirements

It is becoming clearer from emerging research that children need to spend time outdoors to be healthy as they grow and develop. “Children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors.” (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005) The purpose of these requirements is to ensure that all children in child care are given the opportunity to play outdoors on a daily basis and ensure the outdoor learning environment is safe. Outdoor play is beneficial to children as well as caregivers. Research tells us that spending time outdoors, exposed to fresh air, sunlight, and natural elements such as trees and grass, provides many health benefits.

The outdoor learning environment offers a sense of freedom for children. Children are able to play freely with peers, expand their imagination beyond the restraints of indoor activities, release energy, and explore their sense of touch, smell, taste and their sense of motion. Caregivers are in a unique position to utilize the outdoor environment to promote development and learning. The Division requires that children in licensed child care programs spend time outdoors every day, weather permitting.

The North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments (NC OLE) Alliance is a statewide collaboration comprised of organizations, agencies, and individuals focused on improving the quality of outdoor environments and experiences for all children. To access research and other supporting information on the benefits of outdoor play visit the Outdoor Section of the NC Office of School Readiness web site at www.osr.nc.gov/ole.



Another resource available is the *Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS)*, which is a measurement tool available to assist in evaluating the quality of the outdoor environment in child care centers for children three to five years of age. To learn more about quality in outdoor environments for child care and POEMS visit www.poemsn.org.


Definition

- **Weather permitting** is defined as every day, unless there is active precipitation, extremely hot or cold conditions, or public service announcements that advise people to stay indoors due to weather conditions that could be hazardous. The Division allows child care operators to use their best judgment when deciding to take children outdoors in order to make sure children remain safe.

SECTION I. DAILY OUTDOOR PLAY

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL STATUTE 110-91(2) AND CHILD CARE RULE .0509 Daily Outdoor Play

-  Each child in care must be given the opportunity for outdoor play each day that weather conditions permit.
-  The center must provide space and time for vigorous indoor activities when weather conditions do not permit children to play outdoors.

- All children, including infants and toddlers, must be taken outdoors daily.
- Licensed after school programs are required to take children outside daily even if the program operates less than 4 hours a day.
- The amount of time children must spend outdoors or the high and low temperatures for outdoor play are not specified in the child care rules. Child care operators are allowed to use their best judgment when deciding to take children outdoors.
- Short periods of time outdoors must be provided even in hot or cold weather. Playing in gentle rain or snow is a learning experience and can be both educational and fun for children. Make sure children are dressed appropriately.
- The schedule may need to be changed to allow children to go outdoors at the most appropriate time of the day.
- Children that are too sick to go outdoors and/or are not able to participate in all daily activities, which include outdoor activities, should be excluded from care until they are well enough to participate in all daily activities.
-  Getting outdoors daily, even in the winter, helps children develop healthy minds and bodies. Many adults believe children will get sick from playing outside in cold weather. Children are actually more likely to stay healthier if they play outdoors during winter months. Germs are not contained and concentrated outdoors. Refer to the Winter 2005 issue of the NC Child Care Health and Safety Bulletin on Outdoor Health and Safety for additional information about how the outdoors is healthy for children. www.healthychildcarenc.org

- HH** - When outdoor play is not possible, unspent energy can make children irritable, anxious, and difficult to manage. Make indoor days more pleasant and fun by planning activities that keep children active.
- HH** - Help parents understand the benefits of outside play and that children are learning when they go outside. Let parents know children will be going outdoors daily, weather permitting, and to make sure to dress their child properly for the weather.
- HH** - The United States Department of Health and Human Services and the National Association for Sports and Physical Education recommends children should engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily.



The National Health and Safety Performance Standards developed by The Iowa Department of Public Health created the Child Care Weather Watch as a guide to assist caregivers in planning for playtime, field trips, and weather safety. A copy of this guide is available at www.idph.state.ia.us/hcci/common/pdf/weatherwatch.pdf. The Child Care Weather Watch is also used by the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project to determine “weather permitting.”

SECTION 2: OUTDOOR SPACE REQUIREMENTS

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL STATUTE 110-91(6) AND CHILD CARE RULE .1402 Space Requirements



There must be 75 square feet of outdoor space per child, or for the number of children indicated by the center’s licensed capacity.

- If licensed for 6 to 29 children inclusive, there must be 75 square feet per child of outdoor play area for the total number of children for which the center is licensed.
- If licensed for more than 30 children, there must be at least 75 square feet per child of outdoor play area for at least one-half of the total number for which the center is licensed, provided that the minimum amount of space is enough to accommodate at least 30 children.
- The total number of children on the playground cannot exceed the number of children the space will accommodate at 75 square feet per child.