

Director's Corner: Outdoor Play

"It is a happy talent to know how to play." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Play is the highest form of research." – Albert Einstein

Free play outdoors is one of the most developmentally rich opportunities we can offer our children. Pittsburgh's diverse parks and playgrounds afford families a myriad of venues for exploring together and enjoying each other. At the same time, outdoor free play provides children with varied challenges to foster growth in all developmental domains. For example, outdoor play helps children gain confidence in their skills and fosters initiative (**Self-esteem & Independence**), encourages peers to support each other's ideas and negotiate plans (**Interaction & Cooperation**), provides rich topics of conversation and contexts for recording nature observations (**Communication**), provokes inquiry with diverse opportunities to compare, sort, and quantify (**Discovery & Exploration**), builds skills for controlled movement and use of tools while managing risks (**Physical Capabilities / Health & Safety**), and inspires children to both perceive and create beauty (**Artistic Expression & Appreciation**).



During November, the preschoolers will be learning about ways to have a "Healthy Mind & Body". They'll explore strategies for giving their minds and bodies good nutrition, exercise and rest. In addition to the obvious benefits of outdoor experiences for physical exercise, time outdoors also nourishes our minds, stimulates our senses, gives our attention and observation skills a workout, calms our nerves, and focuses our thinking, all in ways that relax both our minds and bodies. The kindergartners will be studying "Native Americans", with an emphasis on the cultural values that emphasize reverence, respect, and humility in our relationship with nature, as well as the practices that encourage humans to live within and as a part of nature.

The National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor play cites research by Fjortoft (2004) and Burdette and Whitaker (2005) indicating that children who play outdoors regularly "become fitter and leaner, develop stronger immune systems, have lower stress levels, have more active imaginations, play more creatively, and have greater respect for themselves and others". At the Children's School, we have enhanced our outdoor classroom to include a wide range of interesting options for children's play, and we are encouraging our classes to spend more time outside. We are observing increasing creativity in children's play in our "mud kitchen" and in the complexity of the imaginative games that involve running and climbing, both when we provide props, such as fabric or costume wings, and when children use what nature provides, such as rocks, acorns, leaves, etc.

Now that the weather is turning colder, families may hesitate to venture outside. But the cold is not a good reason for healthy individuals to stay indoors. At the Children's School, we go outside every day – except in heavy rain and unusually cold temperatures. Children simply need to have the appropriate outer garments – hats, scarves, mittens, boots, etc. In "Last Child in the Woods", Richard Louv suggests that families 'adopt' a tree in your yard or nearby and then visit it regularly. Take pictures of it as it is losing leaves, when it has no leaves, when it has snow on it, and then as it buds in the spring. Rake the leaves and jump in them. Collect the leaves and do an art activity. Do a tree rubbing with crayons and paper. Compare and contrast the tree with others nearby to see which is taller, thinner, darker, smoother, etc. Encourage your child to creatively consider how else you can explore your adopted tree. We'd love to hear about and see photos of your experiences!