

Infants & Toddlers: Let's Go Outside!

Fresh-air activities bring rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and new windows on the world.

By Alice Sterling Honig Ph.D | May , 1999

Babies need and enjoy sensory experiences with nature.

Outdoor spaces should offer toddlers safe places to explore.

INFANTS

There are so many things to do outdoors. And if a baby is cozily bundled up, a nap on a screened porch is a refreshing change - even in cooler weather.

Nurturing With Nature

Seeing and smelling - such pleasing experiences for infants outdoors. In mild weather, be sure to push strollers to places where babies can see, touch, and smell flowering plants. They want to feel the rough bark of a tree, the soft brush of wild grasses or grains of sand, and explore the many textures of large stones and rocks. You can guide this sensory journey as you help them to notice their natural surroundings, like the gently swaying leaves in a summery tree.

If possible, consider landscaping your outdoors with a flowering hedge of perfumed jasmine to delight babies' sense of smell. And on a warm summer day, babies who sit well relish the experience of a shallow wading pool, where they can splash in a few inches of water while you cheer on their discovery of wet versus dry. Be sure babies wear hats and have sunscreen on exposed skin.

Animals

If you can arrange to wheel strollers to a pond, be sure to bring bread crumbs for the ducks. Babies love to be part of the ritual of feeding ducks (and fish too). One 10-month-old, whose visits to the duck pond were such a pleasurable part of daily outdoor excursions, said "duck" as her first Word! If there are flocks of birds that visit a grassy space near your program, babies will also delight in watching them swirl down to peck at seeds you've scattered for them.

Physical Development

Lawns and other safe outdoor spaces are wonderful places to set babies down on their stomachs so they can observe from close range ants busy crawling, grass moving, grasshoppers leaping, buttercups all yellow and dainty. This arrangement will also give babies opportunities to push up from their bellies and strengthen their arm muscles. Be sure to bring along wet wipes, as babies love to

squeeze dirt in their fingers. At the same time, you can help them understand that they may squeeze, touch, and sniff but may not eat many of the earthy materials outdoors.

Urban Spaces

Even a stroll to mail a letter can be an adventure! Lift up baby so he can drop your letter into the slot. And be sure to point out interesting events along the way: "See the doggy sniffing near that fire hydrant?" "See the light turn green at the corner? Now all the cars know they can go zoom, zoom along the street." "Hear the siren wailing as the fire truck rushes to put out a fire?" The sights and sounds of an urban landscape provide so many opportunities for using new words with little ones. You'll see sights together and speak the words, such as truck or car or green light or bus, that babies will have seen and pointed to in picture books.

Sandboxes

Outdoor play in a large sandbox is a delightful sensory experience for very young children. Sandboxes invite babies to use their fingers and hands and, at the same time, to begin to learn simple rules, such as "The sand stays inside the sandbox." Infants develop dexterity while filling and emptying pails or sifting sand with a flour sifter. They learn how sand feels dry and how it feels wet, when mixed with water. And, of great importance, they get a chance to play peacefully next to peers. This companionable side-by-side play is the precursor to more interactive play older babies will come to enjoy.

About the Author

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books on infants and toddlers, including *Behavior Guidance for Infants and Toddlers* and, with H. Brophy, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School*