

Multicultural Programming in Outdoor Learning Environments

The outdoor environment in an early childhood setting comprises the sum of many parts. It is much more than the physical aspects of the setting (the paving, the sandpit, the grass).

The outdoor environment is a combination of the natural elements, the physical properties of natural and human made materials and surfaces, elements that stimulate the senses and the definition and use of space.

Datner wrote:

“A playground should be like a small scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it. Experiences for engaging every sense are needed for instance, rough and smooth objects to look at and feel: light and heavy things to pick up: water and wet materials as well as dry things: cool materials and materials warmed by the sun: soft and hard surfaces: things that make sounds (running water) or that can be struck, plunked and plinked, etc: smells of all varieties (flowers, bark, mud) shiny, bright objects and dull, dark ones: things both huge and tiny: high and low places to look at and from: materials of every type, natural, synthetic, thick, thin an so on. The list is inexhaustible, and the large the number of items that are included, the richer and more varied the environment for the child.” (Datner in Greenman 1988)

If the outdoor environment is a small scale replica of the world, then how easily it follows to make that environment multicultural, just as the world really is. This multicultural perspective can begin quite simply when you make a connection between the plants in the garden and their cultural background. When you choose an activity, or a resource to use in the outdoor environment think about its origins, or make a decision to exchange the items you have always used for an equivalent from another culture an example may be tupperware in the sandpit replaced by baskets and natural materials.

Outdoor environments need a sense of balance.

There needs to be:

- space that is filled (with people plants and things)
- space that is empty.
- public and private spaces
- noisy and quiet spaces

Space and the experience of it occur in a cultural context. Children learn cultural values about how space is to be arranged, inhabited, and shared. In some cultures some directions are sacred or preferred, and direction influences behaviour. Some other cultures have no word for privacy and because people do not like to be alone there is no partitioning of space. When planning outdoor environments consider the cultural experiences of the children in your care.

Including a multicultural perspective will enrich even the simplest activity, and provide children with new ideas, concepts and vocabulary to stimulate their outdoor activities.