



Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor, Nature-Based Early Learning and Child Care Programs

Draft for Public Review

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Alliance



About the Draft

This draft is available for public review and use, and is open to feedback from practitioners, government agencies, and others engaging in the development of ONB early learning and child care policy, regulations, or professional systems.

Please provide feedback using [this google form](#) prior to **March 20th, 2026 to support the revision of this draft.**

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Background

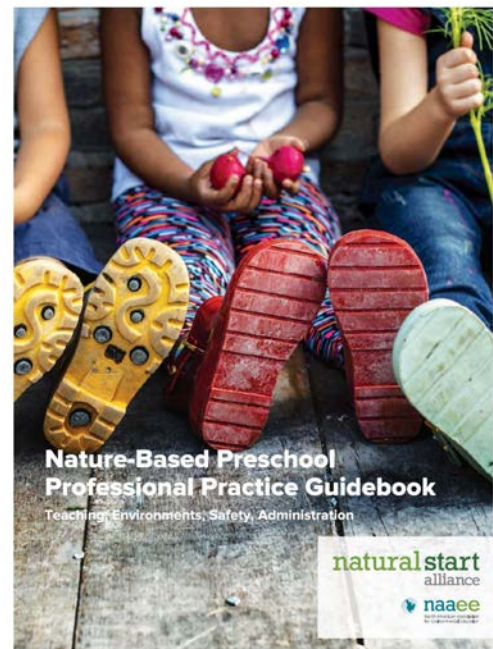
The Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor, Nature-Based (ONB) Early Learning and Child Care Programs (referred to as “the Recommendations”) is a comprehensive resource for communities, including regulatory agencies, in expanding children’s access to safe and high-quality outdoor and nature-based learning through policy and systems of regulation and support.

The Recommendations draw from the expertise and collective review of representatives of the ONB early learning professional community. From January 2024 to May 2025, Dr. Aliza Yair facilitated the development of the Recommendations with the Natural Start Alliance Leadership Team and subsequent review from members of Natural Start Alliance’s various working groups of ONB professionals. This draft also incorporates guidelines from relevant national regulatory agencies, and findings from recent research into children’s health and education.

The Recommendations provide a holistic and detailed collection of ONB program licensing policy and practice options to inform state regulations for child safety and healthy development in outdoor settings. These will also inform the related needs for the early learning workforce’s professional development and other systems-building considerations.

The Recommendations do not, however, describe all considerations for running a high-quality program. The Recommendations are designed to be a complimentary resource to existing guidance on high quality early learning and child care, as well as the Natural Start Alliance’s [*Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook*](#) (referred to as “the Guidebook”).

The Guidebook represents the combined expertise of professionals across the field of nature-based education and describes how nature-based educators can offer diverse preschool programs that are safe, effective, and inclusive. The Guidebook provides in-depth considerations and guidance for high quality programming and teaching.

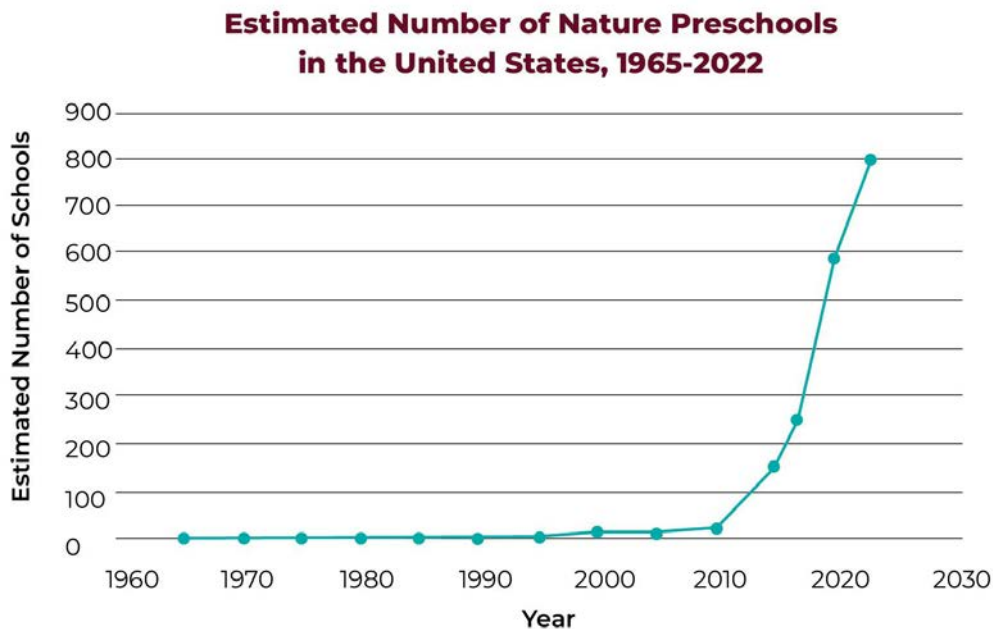


Agencies, advocates, educators and program administrators, and other early learning systems partners are encouraged to review the Guidebook, and to consider these practices when developing nature-based program regulations and supports.

Introduction

Teaching children outdoors in natural environments is a traditional practice of people all over the world. As might be expected, outdoor and nature-based experiences are important for children's health and development across physical, cognitive, emotional, and social domains.¹ From improved eyesight to reduced anxiety, reduced obesity, and improved executive functioning, the benefits of outdoor play and nature-based experiences are vast, and the research base continues to expand.²

Within the last decade, the United States has seen a rapid expansion of nature-based preschools, where nature is a key component of the curriculum and where children spend most of their day outdoors benefitting from this educational approach. According to the [Natural Start Alliance's 2022 national survey](#),³ the number of nature preschools in the United States had more than doubled since 2017. In 2022 there were an estimated 800 nature preschools in the Natural Start Alliance network, serving an estimated 25,600 children, and the field has continued to grow. Many educators, advocates, state government agencies, and partners are embarking on a wide range of efforts to support equitable access to these programs, and further embed nature-based learning opportunities into early learning programs of any setting.



¹ Fyfe-Johnson et al. (2021) Nature and Children's Health: A Systematic Review.

² Frumkin, Howard; Bratman, Gregory N.; Breslow, Sara Jo; Cochran, Bobby; Kahn Jr, Peter H.; Lawler, Joshua J.; Levin, Phillip S.; Tandon, Pooja S.; Varanasi, Usha; Wolf, Kathleen L.; Wood, Spencer A. 2017. Nature contact and human health: A research agenda. *Environmental Health Perspectives*. 125(7):075001. <https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP1663>.

³ North American Association for Environmental Education, [Nature Preschools in the United States: 2022 National Survey](#) (NAAEE, 2023).



Aventuras Forest School

Nature-based preschools (or “nature preschools”) have put nature at the heart of the curriculum, often taking children outside into more natural environments for their educational programming. Outdoor, nature-based (ONB) programs (or “outdoor preschools”) differ from traditional programs in that children are taught outside in a natural environment for most or all of the day, and the program may not use a traditional facility or playground to meet children’s needs. Instead, outdoor preschools will mitigate hazards and manage risks in the outdoor environment using educational and programmatic practices to ensure child safety, and meet children’s health needs with resources that are different from those of a home- or facility-based program.

The exclusive use of outdoor environments can create a barrier to having the outdoor preschool licensed, as state licensing regulations often require the center, home, or school to meet certain building codes as a way of ensuring child safety. According to the Natural Start Alliance 2022 survey, the more outdoor time that a nature preschool has, the less likely it is to be licensed. So for outdoor preschools with no building, or no fences around their outdoor learning environment, there may be no licensing pathway. Without a license, programs may not be able to operate, may have limited hours, or may be unable to accept child care subsidies that support lower-income families to access child care, all of which limits equitable access to these beneficial nature-based programs.

This resource aims to support communities in expanding children’s access to nature-based learning through policy, in ways that make sense for each state’s regulatory and environmental context and climate, drawing from examples in practice and current expertise in the field of nature-based early childhood education policy. This resource also specifically outlines considerations for programmatic and educational approaches to child safety (and the connection to high-quality learning); provides outdoor preschool licensing policy options and recommendations for regulations; and explores the related needs for the early learning workforce’s professional development and other systems-building considerations.

This guidance is a complimentary resource to the Natural Start Alliance’s *Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook* (referred to as “the *Guidebook*”). The *Guidebook* represents the combined expertise of professionals across the field of

nature-based education and describes how nature-based educators can offer diverse preschool programs that are safe, effective, and inclusive. Agencies, advocates, educators, and other early learning systems partners are encouraged to review the *Guidebook*, and to consider these practices when developing nature-based program regulations and supports.



The Basics of ONB Curriculum

Nature is increasingly being recognized as an important, and often low-cost, tool for fostering children's health and development. Whether it's natural environments, gardens, green schoolyards, outdoor classrooms, and even simply views of nature. An ONB early childhood education program takes an immersive approach, putting nature at the heart of the program - nature is a setting for the program and an object of study. Children's play in outdoor natural settings and with natural materials is the basis of an ONB early childhood curriculum and activities.

Key characteristics of an ONB curriculum include:

- Using nature as the central organizing theme, promoting child development and developing children's environmental literacy
- Employing a child-led, play-based approach to teaching that adapts to children's interests, abilities, cultures, and environments
- Guiding children's developmentally appropriate and beneficial risk-taking, while managing the risks in children's play and learning, particularly in the outdoors.
- Spending a significant portion of the instructional time outdoors (in some cases, all of the instructional time is outdoors)

High-quality ONB curricula have common goals and outcomes for children, such as:

- Enhancing children's health and development across multiple domains, including the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional
- Improving children's environmental literacy and connections to nature
- Increasing children's ability to sense risk, be adaptable, and resilient

Nature and Healthy Child Development

Research suggests that there are a variety of ways that nature enhances children's health and development, including:⁴

- Enhancing brain development
- Improving academic performance, including helping children produce richer writing and providing foundations for science learning
- Enhancing communication
- Promoting socio-emotional development
- Promoting emotional resilience and self-regulation
- Promoting executive function
- Providing mental health benefits
- Reducing stress
- Reducing symptoms of ADHD
- Providing therapeutic benefits to children with autism
- Promoting physical activity and motor development

⁴ North American Association for Environmental Education, [*Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook*](#) (NAAEE, 2019), 8.

Hazards and Risks

Systems of safety and education in ONB programs distinguish between the concepts of hazards and risks.

Hazards

A hazard in outdoor programming is a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or there is a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid, and that staff cannot control. A site assessment can identify the hazards in the environment.

Potential hazards in or near outdoor programs can include:

- Heavily trafficked roads
- Deep and/or swift-moving water
- Toxic environmental pollutants
- Toxic plants
- Dangerous animals

During site selection, many hazards are avoided by initially selecting a program location that prevents children's interactions with hazardous conditions. Some hazards can remain present near a licensed location, and be managed by trained and qualified staff.

For hazards specific to outdoor, natural environments, and for hazards that can occur with little warning, such as extreme weather events, the appropriate response and protocol for each type may be different, and are described in this document.

Extreme weather events are increased by the rapid climate change caused by human activity,⁵ and actions to address climate change and the associated increase in extreme weather events are also necessary for children's safety.⁶

Risks

A risk in early learning and outdoor programming is one that can be identified and managed by a child or group of children, while adults support the child(ren) and provide assistance, if necessary, to help them avoid serious injury. Risk can be beneficial and necessary to learning. Risky play (also known as adventure play) is beneficial and necessary to children's development in any setting, as they first learn the skills, coordination, and understanding of living within their environment.

⁵ The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/chapter/chapter-11/>

⁶ The U.S. Early Years Climate Action Plan <https://earlyyearsclimateplan.us/>

What is risky play?

“Risky play” in early childhood education is thrilling or exciting play that involves some risk of injury.⁷ Risky play, as defined in the research, includes six categories: play at speed, at height, with dangerous tools (e.g., hammers), near dangerous elements (e.g., fire, water), rough and tumble play (e.g. play fighting), and play where there is a chance of “getting lost” (e.g. hiding in bushes and being unseen).⁸

There are many benefits of risky play to children’s development, including increased physical activity and social health, independence, confidence, resilience, self-regulation, and risk assessment or appraisal.⁹ These skills and aptitudes are necessary for children to explore the edges of their abilities and assess risks for their own safety, which can decrease the potential for injury in the future. The Guidebook has a deeper look into risky play and safety practices for educators, and there are a number of other resources and books that describe developmentally appropriate risky play activities for young children.

For state agencies, who are responsible for ensuring child safety, it is worth noting that research has also shown little evidence that risky play increases the likelihood of serious injury.¹⁰ There are also systematic and standardized processes that can be put in place to ensure programs are supporting children in risky play well. In the Washington State outdoor preschool pilot, risky play was supported with processes to develop site-specific risky play safety plans, called benefit-risk assessments. In the 2018-2019 and the 2019-2020 school years, over



First Roots Wild Roots

⁷ Sandseter, E. B. H., & Kennair, L. E. O. (2011). Children's risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 9(2), 257–284. doi.org/10.1177/2F147470491100900212

⁸ Hansen Sandseter, Ellen Beate. "Categorising risky play—how can we identify risk-taking in children's play?." *European early childhood education research journal* 15, no. 2 (2007): 237-252.

⁹ Spencer RA, Joshi N, Branje K, Murray N, Kirk SF, Stone MR. Early childhood educator perceptions of risky play in an outdoor loose parts intervention. *AIMS Public Health*. 2021 Mar 8;8(2):213-228. doi: 10.3934/publichealth.2021017. PMID: 34017887; PMCID: PMC8116185.

¹⁰ Brussoni M, Gibbons R, Gray C, Ishikawa T, Sandseter EB, Bienenstock A, Chabot G, Fuselli P, Herrington S, Janssen I, Pickett W, Power M, Stanger N, Sampson M, Tremblay MS. What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2015 Jun 8;12(6):6423-54. doi: 10.3390/ijerph120606423. PMID: 26062038; PMCID: PMC4483710.

1,000 children were enrolled in outdoor preschool programs in the pilot and there were no serious injuries from risky play.¹¹

Common risky, adventure play elements in outdoor nature-based programming include:

- Balancing or climbing on logs or other natural features
- Sliding or running down hills
- Lifting or carrying large branches
- Playing or running on uneven terrain
- Using tools

Site selection of an ONB program should be inclusive of areas appropriate for risky play. This document contains recommendations for how benefit-risk assessments are used as a basis for site-specific and activity-specific policies and methods for risk mitigation.



Worldmind Nature Immersion School

¹¹ Washington State Department of Children, Youth, & Families, *Outdoor Preschool Pilot Final Legislative Report* (November 2020).
<https://dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/reports/OutdoorPreschoolPilotFinal2020.pdf>

Benefit-Risk Assessment

Benefit-risk assessments are a key practice in providing safe and high-quality outdoor, nature-based programs for children. Programs develop benefit-risk assessments to examine benefits and risks of activities in support of the curriculum and to develop policies for managing risk in activities. Before engaging in potentially risky activities, programs ensure a proper balance between potential benefits and risks by either eliminating activities for which risks outweigh benefits, or managing potentially risky activities that confer significant benefits.

Decisions about what level of risk is manageable for the program depend on a variety of factors, including: staff training, experience, and comfort with activity; experience and preferences of children and families in the program; children's individual needs; teacher-child ratios; licensing requirements; insurance requirements; and any other important factors.

Benefit-risk assessments are a preventative measure, developed in advance of bringing children to a location, and should be included in a program's practices and policies. It is often distinguished that benefit-risk assessments are designed to evaluate activities within particular locations, while site assessments focus on risks and hazards in the environment.

Benefit-risk assessments should include:

1. a description of an activity in the proposed location,
2. the benefits of that activity to children's learning and development,
3. the risks that are present or that could reasonably arise from the activity and/or location; and
4. plans to mitigate the risks, often involving developmentally appropriate teaching practices.

For example, tree climbing can promote children's large motor development and self-regulation during a challenging and exciting effort, and can also put children at risk for falls or cuts. Therefore, tree climbing as an activity will need to have fall zones cleared of sharp hazards and branches checked for stability. Staff will need to provide consistent and physically close supervision, utilizing teaching practices to encourage children's own assessment of risk (e.g., the texture of the bark and grip of their shoes), the actions they will take to manage that risk, and intervene when needed.

Benefit-risk assessments can be helpful for all programs, just as risky play is beneficial to all children, even outside of ONB programs. Utilizing benefit-risk assessments in licensing ONB programs, or with any program engaging in risky play, can support children's safety and confer the benefits of such activities in a more site-specific way.

[Appendix A](#) provides a sample benefit-risk assessment based on [Washington state's benefit-risk assessment form](#). The following table provides a summary example based on Washington state's form.

Location or Activity	Benefits	Hazards and Risks	Mitigation Procedure
Tree Climbing	Gross motor skills, balance, risk analysis and awareness, planning, decision-making, taking turns, communication, self-esteem building, sensory development, hand/feet/eye coordination, strength building, flexibility, endurance, and energy release	Falling, slipping, cuts and abrasions, hard ground surface—potential head injury, sharp or hard objects within and under tree, child not developmentally able to evaluate ability, new or untrained staff supervision and teaching issues, icy or frosty conditions that make the tree too slippery, staff not appropriately stationed for immediate assistance and ability to reach child's midriff, and child able to climb out of reach of staff person	Staff inspect tree for loose branches or other hazards. Staff are within reach of child's midriff at all times. One child climbs at a time. Children waiting their turns are actively supervised with appropriate transition activity. Staff are trained to benefit-risk assessment and policy before they assist with tree climbing activity. Staff evaluate each child's ability, weather and seasonal conditions, ground surface requirements/hazards prior to allowing tree climbing activity.

Types of ONB Programming

Common characteristics of outdoor nature-based (ONB) early learning and child care programs include:

- Operate primarily outdoors in a nature-based setting
- Provide a nature-based curriculum
- May have a permanently located and maintained outdoor classroom
- May be a roaming program, where resources are brought to the location each day
- May be associated with a child care center where children are also enrolled, but is not considered in capacity determinations for the outdoor preschool



The Nest Nature School

ONB program models often differ based on their access and/or partnership to different types of indoor facilities. Child care programs offered in a natural environment and without the use of a center- or school-based facility use alternative practices and resources to meet children's biological and educational needs.

Considerations for ONB programs with minimal access to a building or facility:

- Alternative shelters, such as a picnic shelter, lodge, yurt, or other structure will be used to provide safety from potentially harmful weather events, such as lightning or high winds. Programs may partner with other institutions, such as libraries or schools, for access to emergency weather shelter.
- Alternative shelters may be used to meet some of the children's daily needs by providing shade or shelter while eating or napping. These shelter spaces are not intended for educational programming and do not need the same requirements as a center- or school-based classroom. However, the spatial needs appropriate for the number of children enrolled are considered in determining space requirements for shelter spaces such as the amount of space between sleeping cots or number of tables and seats.
- Some parks or outdoor natural areas have public bathroom facilities that may be used by ONB programs. Some programs may use portable toilets that use non-toxic chemical solutions to break down human waste, or may set up a composting toilet system according to state environmental guidelines.
- In an all-outdoor program, children's educational needs are primarily met through the nature-based curriculum. However teachers often bring additional materials, such as books and writing/drawing supplies, to support literacy and

fine motor development. Teachers rotate these throughout the week and seasons and provide options that meet children's interests and developmental levels, just like in a center-based program.

- Outdoor nature-based programs may have an established outdoor classroom and play areas, and/or move around and utilize spaces with minimal environmental impact.

Considerations for ONB programs with consistent center- or school-based facilities access:

- Child care centers or school-based pre-K programs may provide an outdoor preschool program by licensing a natural area outside of the center or school grounds, also known as an “outdoor classroom.”
- Outdoor classrooms can be developed without requiring major capital investment to expand the facility.
- Outdoor classrooms can increase the number of children enrolled and served by a building-based program. Programs can offer a hybrid, indoor/outdoor model where groups of children alternate being in the “outdoor classroom” or building. This can give more children an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the “outdoor classroom.”



ONB Licensing Pathways

In states where ONB licensing is not available, ONB programs often operate within state law by providing half-day or short-term, private-pay child care, or operate as part of a center-based program and with waivers or site-specific safety plans for the outdoor space. In 2022, an estimated 800 nature preschools and forest kindergartens operated in 47 states.¹²

In 2017, Washington became the first state to begin a pilot to develop licensing regulations for outdoor preschools and integrate outdoor preschools into the state's early learning quality improvement systems. This pilot was mandated (and funded) by the WA State Legislature, and in 2021 Washington successfully established an ONB child care license type, with specific standards that were aligned with center- or family home-based child care regulations where possible. Since then, other states have also begun a licensing pathway for outdoor nature-based programs as a license type.

Each state has a unique regulatory landscape that will dictate the specific options and opportunities for outdoor, nature-based early learning licensure. There are a variety of pathways that states can use to expand ONB programming, each with their own benefits and considerations, including:

1. **Program-specific waivers or variances to existing center- or family home-based licensing regulations**
 - For example, a licensed center receives a waiver to add an outdoor classroom, expanding the center's capacity from 10 children to 20 children, with 10 being enrolled in the center-based program and 10 in the outdoor program
 - This option allows for flexibility when licensing outdoor nature-based programs or outdoor classrooms, but can be subject to inconsistencies or biases of licensing offices or staff
 - Does not require change to law or regulations and is unlikely to be a specifically funded effort
 - May require ONB programs to have an affiliation or access to a licensed center or school if there is a lack of alternative facilities to provide shelter due to weather concerns or to meet children's biological needs
2. **Changes to existing center-based playground regulations that allow for more naturalized environments for all programs**
 - This pathway is most likely to advance nature-centered educational opportunities for all children, as well as more rapidly advance workforce

¹² North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). [*Nature Preschools in the United States: 2022 National Survey*](#) (NAAEE, 2023).

and community knowledge and experience in nature-centered early childhood education

- On its own, it does not address the policies and practices needed to ensure child safety in a non-fenced environment or without access to a program facility.
- Will require revising current center-based regulations
- May require states to revise their CCDF¹³ plan, QRIS¹⁴ assessments, and coaching materials, as well as make changes to state and/or regional interpretations of federal program environmental standards
 - The Head Start ECLKC¹⁵ provides explicit support and resources for nature-based learning and development in alignment with national standards.¹⁶
 - Organizations like the [Natural Learning Initiative](#), [Early Childhood Health Outdoors](#), and [Nature Explore](#) also provide many resources to support the design and use of more natural environments and nature-based play in early childhood.

3. Utilizing pilot or demonstration sites to develop and test ONB licensing regulations, licensing processes, and other systems of support

- Offers an opportunity for collaboration across stakeholder groups, institutions, and state departments
- May require some change in regulations and/or law
- If legislatively mandated, can be funded and staffed for project management and additional oversight during development and testing
- Can provide time for workforce preparation and quality improvement partners to develop standards and practices
- Provides an opportunity for data collection and training specifically regarding ONB practices

4. Creating and adopting ONB license regulations without a pilot

- May be suitable for states that are familiar with ONB programming and licensing regulations for other states with similar environments and climates. Additionally, training opportunities may already exist for ONB program providers or licensing staff in the region.
- May be suitable for states that have developed and tested ONB licensing waivers or variances
- May reduce opportunities to adjust licensing regulations

¹³ Child Care Development Fund

¹⁴ Quality Rating and Improvement System

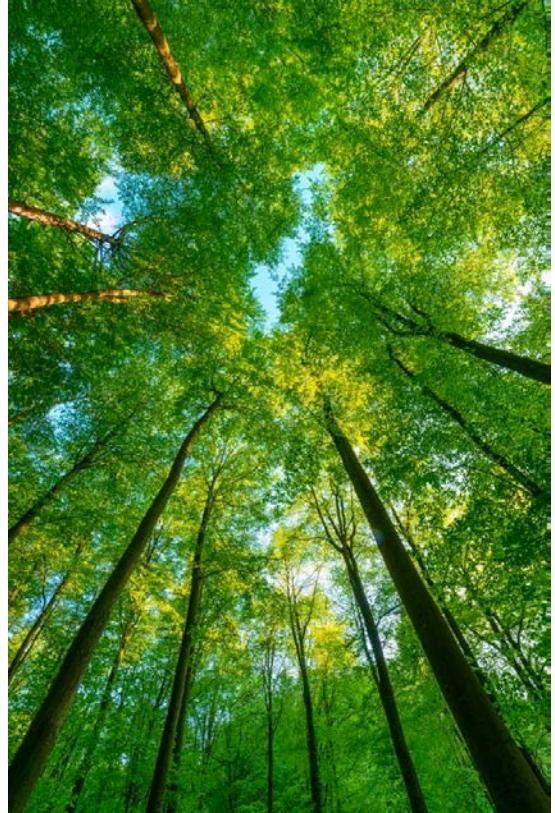
¹⁵ Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Center (ECLKC)

¹⁶ "Learning Environments: Nature-based Learning and Development", Head Start, accessed August 21, 2025, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/nature-based-learning-development>

Regardless of which licensing pathway is taken, there is great benefit to the collaborative development of the ONB regulations and systems. State agency staff responsible for this work can, and should, lean on the expertise of providers and their families (including children) in co-creating and revising regulations.

There is also a necessity and great benefit to including experts from other related fields, such as workforce preparation, departments of health, sanitation, parks, etc. Including partners early on in the process allows all interested parties to work through concerns and collaborate. Many people will have very legitimate concerns, and it can be important to begin with the intent and knowledge that bringing children into more natural outdoor environments is what is ultimately best for children.

A pilot or other co-creative processes, such as working with an advisory committee, allows people from across systems of governance, education, and care to share their concerns and expertise, and then create new and innovative standards of practice within and for the community.



Recommendations

The Natural Start Alliance recommends the following standards and considerations for setting regulations for health and safety, licensing, and implementing ONB programs. Each state, and sometimes individual programs, may need to adjust these recommendations to suit their own context.

Location Assessment and Program Planning

Outdoor environments can include bounded play spaces and more wild “beyond the fence” spaces. Most nature-based programs also include indoor spaces. In all of these environments, programs use nature and natural elements to support children’s development. The location of an outdoor program is integral to program planning.



Appalachian Forest School

1. Site Assessment and Selection

- a. Program locations should be selected to ensure the environment can support sufficient learning opportunities for children and meet their developmental needs, as described in ‘Key Characteristic 5: Places and Spaces’ in the [*NAAEE Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence*](#).¹⁷ These include:
 - i. Spaces and places to enhance development

¹⁷ North American Association for Environmental Education, [*Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence*](#) (NAAEE, 2016).

- ii. Natural components
 - iii. Comfortable for both children and adults
 - iv. Maintenance and usability
 - v. Health, safety, and risk
 - vi. Environmental sustainability.
- b. ONB program locations should meet specific considerations for health, hygiene, safety, and activities, which are described further in these Recommendations.
- c. Specific considerations on whether the location can support a high quality nature-based curriculum include:
- i. Shade and areas for comfort or quiet
 - ii. Opportunities to explore novel areas, native plants and wildlife, and/or to deepen children's connection with a consistent location
 - iii. Sufficient space for rigorous physical activities, such as open fields or trails for hiking
 - iv. Availability of loose, open-ended objects, such as rocks, sticks, sand and logs
 - v. Other features of interest, such as creeks or ponds
 - vi. Whether the location can support sustained use, particularly considering the impact of children's play over long periods of time. This depends on:
 - the extent to which an environment is managed or wild
 - the variety of locations that can be visited
 - the time it takes for an area's flora and fauna to recover from program use
- d. ONB programs should have and submit a map of the program area for licensing purposes.
- i. These maps should have all required locations noted (e.g. toilets, gross motor play spaces), proposed boundaries of the licensed space, and pathways and locations of emergency shelters. Online programs can provide quick ways to measure the square footage of irregular areas.
 - ii. Families and other officials should also have the map to locate the program when needed.
- e. Area Requirements
- i. Area requirements ensure at least daily access to areas that meet the state's existing minimums for other licensed spaces, such as for gross motor play, as well as ensuring all health and educational needs can be met. Often, nature-based programs will operate in areas large enough for children to engage in a variety of locations.
 - ii. Area requirements, often measured by square footage per child, for an ONB program will depend on the habitat and ecosystem considerations within a state's jurisdiction. Nature-based programs will also consider the impact on the land and make it sustainable

for the program, using established trails and designating areas for hands-on learning and play.

- iii. As a starting place to setting area requirements, consider examples or guidance from early learning and educational programs at nature centers with native habitats. States may then allow for flexibility through variances, approval from a land manager or owner, considering to what extent the location is managed or wild, and the affordances provided.¹⁸

2. Benefit-Risk Assessment for Site Selection

- a. When selecting a site, ONB programs may develop preliminary benefit-risk assessments of potential activities in the proposed location to examine whether or not a location will sufficiently support a high quality ONB program.
- b. Benefit-risk assessments can be used in site selection to:
 - i. Analyze the risks of the activity in a specific location.
 - The risks of a specific activity may differ across various locations within a single program site.
 - Risks can change with the season, weather, or other factors.
 - Risks can depend on the age, developmental levels, and group sizes of children, and the qualifications and number of adults present. This may impact decisions of program size and staffing.
 - ii. Describe the policies for managing identified risks.
 - These policies can be reviewed by families before enrollment, and for quality assurance during a licensing process.
 - Due to the variability of natural environments, these policies function as program-specific safety plans. Licensing agencies may have existing processes in place for review and approval of such plans.
 - Policies may depend on the qualifications or skills of the teacher present (e.g. foraging done only with a teacher skilled in plant identification and with knowledge of the differing toxicity of plants at different stages of growth)
- c. Licensing agency representatives need to be knowledgeable about the risks and hazards in an area, and the appropriate responses to those risks and hazards, in order to assess the safety of a proposed site.
- d. See appendix A for an example of a state licensing agency's required benefit-risk assessment form.

¹⁸ NAAEE 2019, *Nature-Based Preschool Guidebook*, 40-44

3. Shelters and Other Structures

- a. Most, if not all, of the programmatic time of an ONB program is spent outdoors in a natural setting. However, ONB programs may utilize a variety of shelters and structures to meet the biological needs of children, such as toileting, eating, and sleeping.
- b. Structures such as picnic shelters, yurts, lean-to's, tents, or domes can provide protection from elements such as wind, rain, or sun. For these purposes, structures would not need to meet the same capacity and building requirements of a center but should be built according to relevant building codes or zoning requirements.
 - i. While developing regulations, state agencies should collaborate with local government departments to ensure regulatory alignment. Counties may wish to update their requirements to allow for and support the establishment of ONB programs in their area.
- c. Shelters, especially those appropriate for lock-down situations, must be accessible to programs at all times. See below for more on emergency shelters.



Heartwood Nature School

4. Shelters in Emergency Responses

- a. Unpredicted extreme weather events and conditions will require programs to adjust their programming or enact their emergency plans if children are already present for the day, or be closed so that children can shelter with their families and caregivers. Access to an emergency shelter is an important factor in site selection.
- b. Most of the expectations for ONB programs' emergency preparedness plans are the same as for other child care or early learning programs, including drills, evacuation procedures, shelter-in-place, and lockdown procedures.¹⁹ However, the type of emergency and how much warning there is can impact when and where to seek shelter. Considerations for specific types of emergency plans are described in the Outdoor Safety section below.

¹⁹ "Emergency Preparedness Manual for Early Childhood Programs", Head Start, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://headstart.gov/safety-practices/emergency-preparedness-manual-early-childhood-programs/emergency-preparedness-manual-early-childhood-programs>

- c. Informing local emergency services: the local police, fire station, and forest or land management services should be notified of the program location and schedule. This can build an informed relationship between the program and the local emergency response teams. Programs can establish regular (i.e. yearly) reviews of their emergency plans.



Premier NW Kids Forest School

- d. Sometimes the closest buildings, though privately owned by another, may be the best option to shelter-in-place. Programs may work with a building's owner or manager to ensure access, identify a suitable location within the building for children to gather, and select an area to store emergency items. Common publicly accessible options include nearby libraries or schools.
- e. Programs should have a primary and secondary route to walk, or transport children to designated locations, when evacuating to an emergency shelter. If programs have a vehicle they will use, the usual state requirements for transporting children in vehicles can apply.

5. Access to Natural Spaces and Use of Public Lands

- a. Some ONB programs operate on privately owned land, including existing family home or center-based child-care or early learning providers. Others may access natural spaces through the public lands and parks of the region. Each state or city's parks department, or other owners and managers of natural spaces used by ONB programs, may have their own practices for creating agreements with child care and early learning providers.
- b. Land-use agreements or contracts are an opportunity for a public lands' manager and an ONB program director to partner on the use and management of the natural learning environment, as well as how both parties can support families and children who rely on these programs.
- c. Land-use agreements have common considerations, such as:
 - i. Scheduling
 - ii. Use of shelters or building facilities
 - iii. Access to bathrooms and running water, or the provision and cleaning responsibilities of portable toilets.
 - iv. Leave-no-trace or other waste management expectations, where appropriate

- v. Storage of materials on-site
- vi. Liability Insurance
- vii. Partnerships in emergency responsiveness
- viii. Transportation and access to drop off/pick up areas.
- ix. Impacts on native species and habitats, partnership in restoration projects
- x. Dispute resolution processes, including timelines for program adjustments that consider families' consistent need for child care.
- xi. Strategies to overcome barriers for families and impacts on the local community.

6. Sharing Public Spaces

- a. Programs operating in a public space should have protocols in place for when they may be sharing lands or facilities. Strategies to support children's access to an appropriate educational space and facilities include:
 - i. Having a nearby back-up location or multiple play spaces in the licensed area.
 - ii. Using cones or strings to mark the boundaries of the program and/or separate groups. (This is a useful, and often necessary, pedagogical tool to use with children to support their physical regulation and to ensure they remain within sight of teachers or staff.)
 - iii. Bringing supplies to sanitize public restrooms before children's use.
- b. Considerations for interacting with other members of the public include assessing or monitoring their activity to determine if their behavior is a benefit or a potential hazard to be avoided.
 - i. These protocols should allow for positive interactions with the community of a positive nature, such as learning etiquette and how to identify, respond to, and even learn from appropriate public activities (e.g. being quiet around birders).
 - ii. For extreme and imminently dangerous situations, more is described in the Outdoor Safety section below.

7. Storage and Carrying Supplies

- a. Storage on site may be possible, and ONB program staff may also carry necessary supplies in backpacks or pulled in a cart when changing location during the program day.



Asheville Farmstead School

- b. If there are limitations to the security and accessibility of storage and other necessary items on-site, ONB programs must then bring sufficient water, food, clothing, hygiene and sanitary supplies to the site each day.
- c. For adults, backpacks with a waist strap are the most supportive when carrying heavy loads. Children should only wear child-sized bags, preferably with a buckle across the chest, if they will be going on walks with their own bags. If using a cart to carry supplies, one staff person should have both hands free.

Health and Hygiene

Providing an ECE program in an outdoor, natural environment likely requires different methods of ensuring children's health and hygiene than when indoors. Outdoor environments also present their own unique needs for ensuring health and hygiene, and these are often site and climate-specific. Developing standards for alternative methods for health and hygiene may require the partnership of other agencies. Licensing ONB programs is a great opportunity for some creative problem-solving.

8. Dangerous Animals or Toxic Plants

- a. Local flora and fauna provide opportunities for learning about sustainable environmental practices. The learning opportunities may include responsible harvesting and foraging, as well as responding to the presence of dangerous animals or toxic plants.
- b. ONB programs' staff should be prepared to identify and avoid or otherwise respond to any dangerous animals or toxic plants in the local ecosystem. This information should be included in required training for ONB staff.
- c. The Guidebook has further information,²⁰ and these may be included in local wilderness first aid training.
- d. Some areas may have wild animals that can require a program to relocate or close. The program provider and park manager can partner to communicate if dangerous wild animals are in an area.
- e. Programs may also be required to report sightings or interactions to appropriate officials.

9. Drinking Water

- a. ONB programs may utilize alternative practices for drinking water and eating than traditional, indoor programs.
- b. Programs must have potable water available for children and staff, meeting reasonable water safety requirements.
- c. Programs most often designate one water bottle or reusable cup per child to avoid cross-contamination, monitor children's water intake, refill throughout the day, clean as needed with sanitizer, and otherwise sanitize

²⁰ NAAEE 2019, *Nature-Based Preschool Guidebook*, 64

at the end of program day/before the next day.

- d. Programs should consider providing children with a labeled water bottle, for their use only, as well as a large water cooler for refills or other purposes. This aids in reducing cross-contamination, and helps staff monitor children's water intake.



Hugging Tree Nature Preschool

10. Food

- a. To ensure that food is kept at the appropriate food-safety temperature, ONB programs may utilize a variety of methods, such as using thermoses, coolers and ice(packs), or rely on the cold outside temperature in the shade, when appropriate.
- b. Food may be cooked to appropriate temperatures through various methods, such as campfires, camping stoves, or other heating sources.
- c. Rather than serving children at tables in small groups, ONB programs often consider pre-packed lunch boxes for children and use a tarp or table cloth that is easily sanitized to provide a clean surface for sitting and eating.
- d. Programs may consider menu planning approaches and vegetarian alternatives that reduce the need for refrigeration.

11. Handwashing

- a. ONB programs should have access to adequate handwashing facilities on site or be able to set up temporary handwashing stations.
- b. Handwashing stations should include a water dispenser that allows for water to run over children's hands, liquid soap, a catchment system for the wastewater, individual-use towels, and a bag for used towels.
 - i. For instances where soap and water are not immediately available, hand sanitizing liquid or wipes may be used if this is appropriate to the environmental conditions.



Ashdown Forest School

12. Toileting

- a. Public restrooms may be used, however, programs should bring supplies to sanitize surfaces before children's use.
- b. Outdoor programs, in partnership with a public park or landowner, may rent and provide a portable, non-toxic, chemical toilet (aka porta-potties), that can be locked and designated for the program's use only.
- c. Any backcountry toileting must be done according to Leave No Trace guidelines, principles (as promoted by the National Wildlife Service)²¹ and/or by the permission of a park's land manager. Privacy can be supported with the use of a privacy tent.
- d. Composting toilets may also be acceptable, and should meet the state's department of health guidelines.

13. Sleep and Rest

- a. Finding quiet and restful spaces for children is an important consideration for child development and basic biological needs.
- b. ONB programs may bring sleeping pads, hammocks and sleeping bags for children and may use large tents or other shelters, as appropriate for their location. ONB programs may also have an alternative structure, like a yurt, that can be used to meet this particular programmatic need.
- c. Sleeping pads and sleeping bags will have ratings that indicate their suitability for various temperatures. For sleeping pads, this is known as an r-value and can be used to determine if children will be safe to sleep outdoors.
- d. Hammocks may be used when made with a breathable material, hung low down and over a soft surface, and only for preschool-aged children and above.



Secret Forest Playschool

14. Medication and First-Aid

- a. First-aid kits should be on-site and immediately accessible to program staff. In ONB programs, they are often carried in the staff's backpacks.
- b. Depending on the state's climate, season, and program activities, ONB programs may require additional supplies, such as hand-warmers (should not directly touch skin) and fire-suppression blankets.

²¹ Leave No Trace 7 Principles, National Park Service, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/leave-no-trace-seven-principles.htm>

- c. Locations requiring staff trained in Wilderness First Aid (WFA) may pack additional items in their first aid kits.
 - i. See the Pre-Service Training Additions for ONB Program Staff recommendation below for more on WFA training requirements.
- d. Medication may be stored at the correct temperatures through temperature-controlled containers or thermal-controlled cooler.



Rooted and Free Nature School

Outdoor Safety

Weather such as rain, wind, snow, and high or low temperatures are not usually a cause for ONB programs to close, however some program adjustments may be made. Suitable clothing, access to shade and shelter, and other practices can make various weather conditions an exciting and educational part of our experiences of nature. These experiences not only help children develop practical skills but also nurture their sense of adventure and resilience. Outdoor programs have emergency responses to hazardous weather events, such as high winds or lightning, that are dependent on their location and the type of hazardous weather. As global temperatures rise and extreme weather events occur more frequently, it is likely to become more important for communities, program staff and children to learn strategies for safety outdoors in new or extreme weather patterns.

15. Weather Considerations and Program Adjustments

- a. ONB programs, as primarily outdoors, must have a regular practice of checking the weather conditions (temperature, precipitation, wind,, air quality, etc.). At a minimum, programs should check the weather forecast prior to the start of the program each day in order to prepare.
 - i. Weather forecasts should be checked twice daily when programs provide full-day hours, there is potential for a hazardous weather event (e.g. lightning or severe storms, wildfire smoke), and particularly in the case of programs located in areas where topographic or environmental features may give rise to rapid shifts.
 - ii. Staff should use the most accurate weather forecasting methods for their location, and should use the same methods as each other. Weather apps should be from reliable and research-based weather forecasting sources, where possible.
 - iii. In many locations, states and municipalities have processes that can alert the public of weather-related emergencies, such as through push notifications. State emergency or land management

systems may also provide indications of high-risk weather conditions, sometimes called “red flag conditions” or “storm watches”.

- iv. Weather monitoring equipment, such as lightning alarms and air quality measures may be necessary for programs when reliable weather forecasting or alerts are not available.
- b. Instead of closure, common program adjustments include:
 - i. Staying closer to an overhead shelter
 - ii. Coming inside for a warm-up/cool-down, where children can use bathroom facilities and have a warm or cold drink or snack before returning outside. This can extend the total amount of time children are able to be outside.
 - iii. Engaging children in weather-specific activities (for example, encouraging vigorous physical activities in cold weather or water play in warm weather).
 - iv. Shortening the program day.
- c. Weather conditions that may be a cause for closure for ONB programs are dependent on local climate, and can include extreme temperatures, high winds, poor air quality, lightning, severe storms, flooding, hail, and/or tornados, described further in the Outdoor safety section below.
- d. Expectations for program closure or adjustment will differ for programs that do or do not have access to suitable indoor program spaces.
- e. Policies regarding temperature must include the impacts of humidity (heat index) and wind (wind chill) when measuring temperature.
- f. Programs should have a clear policy about weather-related program adjustments and closures, and must have timely communication with families. These policies should be included in land-use agreements, as well as program and parent handbooks.
- g. Programs often align with the decisions of the school district for program closures, but may not align with decisions for indoor recess as ONB programs will be better prepared for supporting outdoor play.

16. Clothing

- a. Having clothing that provides protection from sun, wind, rain, snow, or ice is essential to safety in the outdoors. ONB Programs partner with caregivers to ensure children arrive ready to be outside. However programs also should have the necessary clothing items available for children who do not have them. Important clothing considerations include:²²

²² “Caring for Our Children”, National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://nrckids.org/CFOC/Database/3.1.3.2>

- i. Sunhats, lightweight and light-colored clothes with long sleeves to protect against direct sun.²³
 - ii. Wool or synthetic layers in the cold and wet.²⁴
 - iii. Waterproof outer layers for rain or snow, including boots, pants, jackets, mittens, and hats to keep the skin dry.
 - iv. Having additional dry clothes available as needed.
- b. Adding layers of clothing may change the fit of children's outer articles, such as boots, and a common mistake is the addition of layers of socks, which can cut off circulation rather than provide extra insulation.
 - c. Adding layers of clothing may change the fit of children's mobility-assisting devices, such as wheelchairs, and should be considered for ensuring safe accessibility to outdoor programs.
 - d. As a necessary expenditure for ONB programs, states should consider how to financially or materially support programs and families meet the need for appropriate outerwear. States may already have mechanisms for funding through other capacity-expanding capital investments or green schoolyards funding programs. Many ONB programs have gear lending libraries for families, or pass down gear between families as children outgrow clothes.



University of Delaware Lab School

17. Temperatures - General

- a. Temperature always has to be attended to, and being comfortable and safe can often be accommodated through appropriate clothing, hydration, access to shade, shelters, campfires, or other heat sources.
- b. The local climate, the weather that people are acclimated to, the health of staff and children, and the types of shelter available will influence a program's decision to adapt its operations in the event of extreme temperatures, including potential closures.

²³ "The Best Clothing for Humidity and Hot Weather", REI, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/how-to-dress-for-humidity.html>

²⁴ "How to Dress in Cold Weather", REI, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/how-to-dress-in-cold-weather.html#:~:text=Base%20layer%3A%20Your%20long%20underwear,you%20from%20rain%20and%20wind>

- c. The American Academy of Pediatrics provides many resources²⁵ on how to manage outdoor play in hot or cold temperatures, as does the National Weather Service.²⁶
- d. Many of these practices should be a required part of staff onboarding, training, and emergency preparedness plans for ONB programs.

18. Heat

- a. The impact of hot temperatures are exacerbated by humidity, and ONB programs must consider the heat index, not just temperature, when making decisions about program operations.
 - i. In areas where higher temperatures are unseasonable or rare, consider if children and staff have had time to acclimate.
 - ii. Consider also the age of the child(ren), as children's abilities to tolerate heat by sweating or other measures increases with age in the early years.
- b. Young children are more susceptible to heat-related illness than older children. Staff should understand how to identify warning signs of heat-related illness in children and what to do about it. The CDC provides resources,²⁷ and should be included in staff training for first aid. Additional information about heat and health can be found at www.heat.gov.
- c. **For temperatures at a heat index of 90°F to 100°F:**
 - i. Remain hydrated - provide ample drinking water, and avoid serving liquids high in sugar.
 - ii. Utilize sunscreen and lightweight, breathable, sun-protective clothing
 - iii. Utilize shade, including sun hats or umbrellas, tree cover and canopy, built shade structure, and be aware of the position of the sun.

²⁵ "Extreme Heat: Tips to Keep Kids Safe When Temperatures Soar", American Association of Pediatrics, accessed 22 August, 2025, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Protecting-Children-from-Extreme-Heat-Information-for-Parents.aspx>
Summer Sun, Heat & Air Quality: Tips to Keep Kids Safe", American Association of Pediatrics, accessed 22 August, 2025, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Sun-Safety-and-Protection-Tips.aspx>

"Cold Weather Safety for Children: Preventing Frostbite & Hypothermia" American Association of Pediatrics, accessed 22 August, 2025, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Cold-Weather-Safety.aspx>
"Playing Outside in Winter: Tips to Keep Kids Warm & Safe", American Association of Pediatrics, accessed 22 August, 2025, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Winter-Safety.aspx>

²⁶ "During a Heat Wave", National Weather Service, accessed 22 August, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/heat-during>

²⁷ "About Heat and Your Health", CDC, accessed September 2, 2025, https://www.cdc.gov/extreme-heat/signs-symptoms/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/extreme-heat/warning.html

- iv. Avoid heat-absorbing surfaces (eg, metal in the sun) and choose lighter-colored surfaces where possible (eg, a lighter concrete instead of blacktop).
 - v. Play in/with water and utilize evaporative cooling (getting the skin wet and then letting it dry, using the heat energy of the body to change the water from a liquid to a gas).
 - vi. Find or create wind chill by moving to a more windy location or using fans
 - vii. Take field trips to air conditioned spaces (e.g. public libraries)
 - viii. Consider the daily activities and limit children's time playing vigorously in direct sun or during the high heat of the day.
 - ix. Be consistent in watching for signs of heat distress, including regular checks of each child.
- d. **For temperatures at a heat index of 100°F to 120°F:**
- i. Utilize the practices above,
 - ii. Limit time in the heat by integrating cooling-breaks as appropriate to the space and resources available, approximately every 30 minutes (or more frequently if needed),
 - iii. Have access to a cooling source, such as structures with shade and misters, fans, and/or air conditioning throughout the day.
- e. **For temperatures above a heat index of 120°F:**
- i. Stay in a cooled shelter and follow any state emergency protocols.



Will Smith Zoo School



Secret Forest Playschool

19. Cold

- a. The impact of cold temperatures is exacerbated by wind, and ONB programs must consider wind chill,²⁸ in addition to the temperature, when making decisions about adapting or closing the program.
 - i. Water and being wet can cool the body, and the ability to stay or become dry is also an important factor for programs to consider when evaluating the impacts of temperature on each child.
 - ii. In areas where extreme cold is unseasonable or rare, consider if children and staff have had time to acclimate.
- b. Frostbite and hypothermia are risks in extreme cold. Staff should be aware of the signs of these cold-related illnesses, checking each child often. Information on preventing and responding to frostbite and hypothermia should be included in staff first aid training.²⁹
- c. **For temperatures at a wind chill of 32°F to 10°F:**
 - i. Children should be clothed in layers of wool or synthetic materials, have access to hats, scarves, and gloves, as well as waterproof materials for wet weather.
 - ii. Encourage vigorous gross motor activity.
 - iii. Add and remove layers as activity levels change.

²⁸ "Understanding Wind Chill", NOAA, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/cold-wind-chill-chart>

²⁹ "Preventing Hypothermia", CDC, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/winter-weather/prevention/index.html>

"During Extremely Cold Weather" NOAA, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/cold-during>

"Preventing Frostbite" CDC, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/winter-weather/prevention/preventing-frostbite.html>

- iv. Use heat sources such as hand-warmers, heaters, small campfires (see below for more details on this), and serve heated beverages and food.
- v. Play in areas more protected from wind, or create shelter from wind using tarps or other materials.
- vi. Make field trips to heated buildings, and consider utilizing heated areas during still activities such as eating.
- vii. Be consistent in watching for signs of hypothermia or frostbite including frequent checks of each child.
- d. **For temperatures at a wind chill of 10°F to -10°F:**
 - i. Utilize the practices above, and
 - ii. Limit time in the cold by integrating heat breaks (time to rest in heated structures) as appropriate to the children, staff, and program resources.
- e. **For temperatures at a wind chill of -10°F to -30°F and below:**
 - i. Utilize the practices above, and
 - ii. Limit time outdoors to 30 minutes at a time.
- f. **For temperatures at a wind chill of below -30°F:**
 - i. Utilize the practices above, and
 - ii. Stay in a warmed shelter and follow any state emergency protocols. Some communities have adequate strategies to be outdoors in -30°F to -40°F.³⁰

20. High Winds

- a. The National Weather Service describes the various threat levels of wind, with a low threat level at “sustained wind speeds of 21 to 25 mph, or frequent wind gusts of 30 to 35 mph”.³¹ When wind speeds rise above 25 mph, programs choose locations with more protection or shelter from winds.
- b. Programs should be aware of the impacts of wind, including causing branches to fall or debris to be blown about, usually above 39 mph. The Beaufort Scale describes the likely effects of wind at various speeds on trees and structures.³² These impacts should be protected against:
 - i. during the program by finding a sheltered area, and
 - ii. after high-winds events, by having an arborist identify and remove potentially hazardous branches.

³⁰ “Flourishing in Winter”, Dr. Ernst, accessed September 22, 2025, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s_3KB9qCHqYUuQ4I2Cvzt86XTEHIO1tP/view

³¹ “Wind Threat Description”, NOAA, accessed September 3, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/mlb/seasonal_wind_threat

³² “Beaufort Wind Scale”, National Weather Service, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/mfl/beaufort>

21. Air Quality

- a. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides an air quality index (AQI) value that indicates the potential for harm caused by breathing unfiltered air. Young children are considered a sensitive group and sensitive groups may experience health effects at an AQI of 101 or above.³³
- b. The EPA's Air Quality and Outdoor Activity Guidance for Schools describes appropriate, limited physical activity for children from AQI of 101-150, and at an AQI of 151 or above recommends moving indoors or canceling.³⁴ In addition, programs may use masks to reduce impacts of poor air quality. These are appropriate expectations for an ONB early learning program.
- c. The AirNow website allows you to see the air quality of your zip code, and the CDC also provides information on how to stay safe from poor air quality caused by wildfire smoke, including information about respirators for children.^{35, 36}
- d. Portable air quality sensors are available for programs to measure the air quality in a program's specific location to guide programs' decision-making. The EPA has guidance³⁷ on the use of these sensors and interpretation of the data.



22. Severe Storms

- a. Severe Storms pose a threat to children's safety, as they are often a combination of dangerous factors like lightning, high winds, and sometimes tornados.
- b. State and local emergency alert systems should be monitored before and throughout the day during an ONB program.

³³ "Air Quality Index (AQI) Basics", AirNow, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/aqi-basics/>

³⁴ "Air Quality and Outdoor Activity Guidance for Schools", AirNow, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://document.airnow.gov/air-quality-and-outdoor-guidance-for-schools.pdf>

³⁵ <https://www.airnow.gov/>

³⁶ "Safety Guidelines: Wildfires and Wildfire Smoke", CDC, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/wildfires/safety/how-to-safely-stay-safe-during-a-wildfire.html>

³⁷ "How to Use Air Sensors: Air Sensor Guidebook" Environmental Protection Agency, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/air-sensor-toolbox/how-use-air-sensors-air-sensor-guidebook>

- i. Weather WATCH = Hazardous weather is possible, and people should have a plan of action and listen for more information.
- ii. Weather ADVISORY = Hazardous weather is occurring, imminent or likely. Advisories are for less serious conditions than warnings, but could lead to situations that may threaten life or property.
- iii. Weather WARNING = Hazardous weather is occurring, imminent or likely. A warning means weather conditions pose a threat to life or property, and people need to take protective action.
- c. With enough warning, ONB programs will either close or utilize an appropriate indoor facility for shelter, a partial day or field trip. Some weather events may necessitate evacuating an area, or sheltering in place.
- d. ONB programs may have emergency supplies kept at their emergency locations or in grab-and-go bags, or another suitable location on or near the site.
- e. ONB programs should bring children to an emergency shelter once dangerous storm conditions are noticed or predicted (like lightning), or if there is a public alert during program hours.
- f. Programs should also follow guidelines for specific events like lightning, flooding, or tornadoes, as these may have different ideal emergency responses.

23. Lightning

- a. Programs should immediately access an indoor shelter (e.g. a building, or vehicle) when there is lightning within a 6 mile range, and remain sheltered until 30 minutes after the last lightning strike that was within a 6 mile range.³⁸
 - i. This can be measured with portable lightning detectors and there are web-based apps that can provide alerts for lightning within set distances from your location.
 - ii. Program staff can also count the time between thunder and visible lightning to understand how far away the lightning is : 5 seconds = 1 mile, 30 seconds = 6 miles³⁹
- b. Programs should reside close to appropriate shelter when there is lightning in the forecast.
- c. The National Weather Service provides additional tips for staying safe from lightning,⁴⁰ including tips for when access to shelter is unavailable,⁴¹ and

³⁸ "Lightning Safety and Outdoor Sports Activities", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-sports>

³⁹ "Learning Lesson: Determining distance to a Thunderstorm", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.noaa.gov/jetstream/lightning/sound-of-thunder/learning-lesson-determining-distance-to-thunderstorm>

⁴⁰ "Lightning Safety" NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-safety>.

⁴¹ "When a Safe Building or Vehicle is Nearby", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-outdoors>

recommendations specific to wilderness and backcountry settings.⁴²

24. Flooding

- a. Flooding is a temporary overflow of water onto land that is normally dry. Floods are the most common disaster in the United States and are likely to require evacuation from certain areas. Flash floods are rapid overflows of water, usually due to heavy rains and dam/levee failure.
- b. Program staff should be trained and regularly review emergency procedures for flash flooding because of the need for real-time decision-making.
- c. Emergency responses to flash flooding are similar to other evacuation procedures, and for this type of event:
 - i. Emergency locations should be higher ground
 - ii. Multiple routes to the emergency locations may be needed
- d. FEMA provides flood maps that can indicate flood risk,⁴³ and ready.gov provides additional guidance on evacuation during active flooding.⁴⁴

25. Tornadoes

- a. Tornadoes may occur unexpectedly and as part of approaching storms. Programs should have access to alerts for tornado watches, warnings, and emergencies often provided by the National Weather Service.⁴⁵
- b. Program staff should be trained and regularly review emergency procedures for tornadoes because of the need for real-time decision-making.
- c. Programs should be able to access a substantial shelter, such as the basement or interior room (no windows) of a building, especially in areas where tornadoes are common. These shelters should be accessed upon receiving a tornado watch alert.
- d. If there is no basement shelter, programs should seek shelter on the lowest floor of the closest building with the maximum number of walls between the children and the outside, and the least number of windows. The National Weather Service provides additional resources on what to do during a tornado in various situations.⁴⁶

⁴² "Backcountry Lightning Risk Management", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/media/safety/backcountry_lightning.pdf

⁴³ "FEMA Flood Map Service Center: Search By Address", Federal Emergency Management Agency, <https://msc.fema.gov/portal/search>

⁴⁴ "Floods", Ready, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.ready.gov/floods>

⁴⁵ "Understand Tornado Alerts", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/tornado-ww>

⁴⁶ "What to do During a Tornado", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/tornado-during>

26. Earthquakes

- a. While earthquakes are rare, program staff should have access to local or state alert systems, such as the USGS ShakeAlert.⁴⁷
- b. The general guidance of “drop, cover, hold” applies outdoors as well as indoors. When outdoors, care should be taken to move away from trees.
- c. If a program is by the coastline and an earthquake may cause a tsunami or seiche, program staff should follow evacuation protocols and head to higher ground and/or away from the coastline.

27. Evacuation

- a. Outdoor programs must have an appropriate shelter already established as their emergency location for local evacuations (see Shelters in Emergency Responses recommendation above). Evacuation plans that require further travel should align with any local, county, or state guidelines.
- b. Some additional considerations for evacuating an outdoor program include:
 - i. an understanding of, and ability to safely cross the terrain surrounding the program’s location(s) with all children
 - ii. the mobility support needs of children with disabilities
 - iii. the distance from transportation options, such as a van or bus, if those are required

28. Shelter-in-Place/Lockdown

- a. For outdoor programs, the decision of where to shelter in place or lockdown will depend largely on the type of emergency that is occurring. These may be different locations, and an outdoor program may also have multiple options. Decisions of where to go also depend on where the program is operating within the program area and how much warning is provided.
 - i. To shelter in place means staying inside a building or other structure to protect from an outside hazard like weather or environmental contamination.
 - ii. Lockdown involves securing a building to prevent unauthorized entry, typically due to a human threat within or near the building.
- b. Programs must identify at least one suitable building with a locking door and minimal windows within a reasonable distance, such as a park bathroom.
 - i. When there is ample warning, shelters should be sufficient for children to remain for a longer period of time and have food, water, and other items for hygiene, rest, and play stored in the building or

⁴⁷ <https://www.usgs.gov/programs/earthquake-hazards/science/early-warning>

easily accessed near the building. Staff may also have provisions in their backpacks.

- ii. Events of minimal warning such as earthquakes should be responded to immediately as described in their sections.

29. Communications to Prevent or Respond to Hazards

- a. Program staff should have a way to communicate with one another, as well as with program leadership and families, at any time.
- b. Program staff must have a way to call emergency services (such as 911 or poison control) if needed.
- c. Programs should access available emergency alert systems at the state and national levels.⁴⁸
- d. Walkie-talkies are useful for staff to communicate with one another and an off-site director if phone services are down, and are also useful during non-emergencies for supervision practices.
- e. Programs should provide maps to families and local partners, including the licensing agency, police, and fire departments. These maps should show the routes of the program's location and the emergency location(s) of the program.

30. Missing Children Protocols

- a. Have a policy in place for frequent headcounts to ensure all children are accounted for, checking approximately every 10 minutes. Additional proactive practices are described in the Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities section.
- b. Programs should teach and practice with children that if they become separated from the teachers they should stay generally where they are and call out for help.
- c. If there is a hazard nearby, such as a high-traffic area or swift-moving water, a staff person should go to that location as soon as possible to search for the missing child.
- d. Programs should have a communication plan for coordinating a lost child response that is appropriate to their particular location and resources. For example, it may be best for a staff person to contact the ONB program director who is onsite, a staff person of the public park, or police depending on who is closest and most responsive.

Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities

A nature-based early childhood education program takes an immersive approach, putting children's relationship with nature at the heart of the program. Many early childhood education programs use nature and natural elements to enhance the

⁴⁸ "Emergency Alerts", Ready, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://www.ready.gov/alerts>

curriculum and promote environmental stewardship. Outdoor, nature-based play is likely to include risky play activities that can be beneficial to children's growth and development. Different types of risky play offer unique delights, as well as challenges, and require their own considerations for safety. ONB programs partner with children and families to build an inclusive curriculum that supports and affirms children's cultures, languages, ages, developmental levels, and abilities.

31. Benefit-Risk Assessment for Activity Planning

- a. Benefit-risk assessments identify the benefits of an activity in a specific location, and describe the policies for managing any associated risks, including processes for teaching children about risks and safety practices.
- b. Benefit-risk assessments should include:
 - i. A description of an activity in the proposed location
 - ii. The benefits of that location or activity to children's learning and development
 - iii. The risks that are present or that could reasonably arise
 - iv. Plans to mitigate the risks, often involving developmentally appropriate teaching practices
- c. Benefit-risk assessments should consider:
 - i. Children's skills, ages and developmental level, and group size
 - ii. Teacher's skills, qualifications, abilities, and comfort with the activity
 - iii. Supervision requirements and staff ratios
 - iv. Safety equipment for the specific activity or location
 - v. Environmental considerations, such as the weather and seasonal changes
 - vi. Proactive and responsive actions to guide children's safe behavior during a risky play activity
 - vii. Parental consent
- d. Benefit-risk assessments specific to children's disabilities can support the development of IEP's that require time in nature.
- e. See Appendix A for an example of a state licensing agency's required benefit-risk assessment form.

32. Program Materials

- a. ONB programs typically provide fewer man-made materials (such as puzzles, books, plastic toys, etc.) on a daily basis than is typically expected of an indoor program. It is common for ONB programs to:



Northeast LA Forest School

- i. Rely on verbal storytelling at a higher rate than indoor programs, and to
 - ii. Use natural materials as the primary items for a variety of curriculum areas, such as for building, as math manipulatives, dramatic play resources, and for natural sciences.
- b. Programs should ensure children have access to a variety of resources over time, through the intentional selection and rotation of additional materials and/or environments visited by the program.
- c. Natural materials can and should be utilized to support learning across multiple domains of learning, and staff should support children's learning with the opportunities, affordances, and materials provided by the local environment.
- d. Materials used by the program or available in a program's play areas should be nonpoisonous & free of toxins. Nature-based programs should identify any local, natural materials (such as plants, fungi, and insects) that should be avoided and include these in the site's benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans.

33. Inclusion and Belonging

- a. Inclusion is an active process. ONB programs benefit from regular self-assessment of their capacity to meaningfully serve a diverse population of children, adapt to support inclusion of enrolled children and families, and create cultures of belonging that are affirming of diversity.
- b. Programs should develop written policies for inclusion and supporting the access needs of young children. Inclusion policies may address: identifying and responding to developmental or cultural access needs, strategies for open communication, transition plans for newly enrolled children, behavioral support plans, and any early intervention partnerships.
 - i. ONB programs are strongly encouraged to develop policies that eliminate or severely limit expulsion, suspension, and other exclusionary discipline practices.
 - ii. Inclusion practices should be collaboratively developed with, and responsive to, children and their caregivers.
 - iii. Transition plans should be developmentally appropriate and culturally supportive, with goals and shared strategies for successful inclusion into the program.
- c. Programs should establish a curriculum that is responsive to differences in age, ability, developmental needs, and cultural norms.
- d. Programs should consider concerns about children's behaviors in the holistic context of each child's strengths, skill deficits, or unmet developmental needs, and actively partner with caregivers and families to support their strengths-based learning.
- e. States should provide or facilitate access to technical assistance to support programs in implementing these inclusion requirements.

34. Disability

- a. The developmental benefits and learning opportunities afforded by natural environments should be accessible to all children, including children with disabilities.
- b. ONB programs must partner with a child's IEP (individualized education plan) team to meet the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and support children with disabilities' access to meaningful learning opportunities in outdoor, nature-based environments. Activities in nature may even be a specific and intentional aspect to a child's IEP.
- c. Accommodations may include additional staff supervision, support with meeting children's hygiene needs, adapting activities, or support with mobility-assistive and communication-assistive devices.
 - i. Attention should be paid to the accessibility of pathways and facilities, such as public restrooms, when considering what accommodations may be necessary or possible.
 - ii. ONB program staff should receive training to provide accommodations, as needed.
 - iii. State coordinators for IDEA should be knowledgeable of strategies to meet the access needs of children.
- d. Children with disabilities may need specialized support during emergencies, and particularly during evacuation procedures. These should be clarified in a program's emergency plans. Considerations for assisting children with mobility, whether due to a child's disability or an injury, should be part of an area's benefit-risk assessment and related policies.
- e. States may have higher rates of public funding (subsidies) for ONB programs serving children with disabilities to support the program's ability to meet those needs. Licensing an ONB program may allow for state subsidies to be disbursed to these beneficial programs.



Seattle Playgarden

35. Honoring Indigenous Sovereignty and Knowledge

- a. People are a part of nature, and programs that are not provided by Native American Tribes or First Nations should identify opportunities to learn with and from the local Tribes, wherever possible.
- b. Programs should avoid curriculum that stereotypes Native peoples, and should utilize curriculum resources provided by Native peoples wherever possible.
 - i. Examples include resources provided by the National Museum of the American Indian,⁴⁹ and the Washington State Since Time Immemorial curriculum.⁵⁰
 - ii. Program staff may require training and support, as with other nature-based curriculum foundations.



Aventuras Forest School

36. Setting Boundaries to the Play Space

- a. It is vitally important to teach children about the boundaries for play in an outdoor area “beyond the fence” and how to stay with the group.
- b. Programs may use ribbons, cones, or other items, including natural features, to support children in recognizing and remembering boundaries.
- c. Staff are likely to also establish a call, such as a bird noise, that signals to children the need to freeze or return in response to a perceived danger or when going too far away from the group.
- d. This aspect of the curriculum should be provided at the very beginning of a program year, and/or to any children as they enroll.

37. Climbing Natural Features

- a. Natural features that offer climbing opportunities, such as trees or rocky outcrops, are a beneficial aspect to an ONB program. Climbing promotes children’s development of large motor skills, balance, and self-regulation during a challenging and exciting effort.
- b. Natural features such as a log, tree, or boulder, should be tested for stability before children begin to climb.

⁴⁹ “Search NK360° Educational Resources”, Smithsonian, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/lessons-resources/search-resources>

⁵⁰ “John McCoy (Iulilaš) Since Time Immemorial Early Learning Curriculum”, Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/tribal-relations/since-time-immemorial>

- c. Common guidance for testing the strength of branches used for climbing is that the branches of a live tree should be the same or larger than the circumference of a child's wrist. This may be insufficient for certain plants or for dead trees, which require larger branch size.
- d. Children should not be allowed to climb a feature that has an obvious hazard in the area where children may fall, such as sharp tree stumps or rocks, until those objects are removed.
- e. Children should not be picked up and placed into trees or on top of boulders. Staff should encourage children to accept their current levels of ability as they work toward goals and learn how to climb safely.
 - i. Common guidance for safe climbing technique is to have three points of contact at all times.
 - ii. Common guidance for ability levels is that if a child cannot get themselves up, they likely cannot get themselves down.
 - iii. Staff should avoid practices where children need an adult to help them down once they have climbed up.
- f. Climbing in the outdoors should require a teacher to be within arm's reach of the child's midriff as they climb beyond 30 inches⁵¹ off the ground, effectively acting as a barrier and being able to provide support as needed.
 - i. Children should not be allowed to climb beyond where a staff person, capable of lifting them off, can reach, and this exact height will change depending on the staff present.
 - ii. Climbing natural features may be limited to 1-2 children at a time so that a staff person can be actively supervising and within arm's reach of the children.



SOL Forest School

38. Campfires

- a. When managed properly, small campfires can be a valuable asset to children's learning about nature, provide comfort during cold or wet days, and help children learn about fire safety practices.
- b. If allowed on the property, campfire activities should follow all U.S. Forest Service guidelines for fire safety.⁵²

⁵¹ CPSC Playground Guidelines recommend barriers and guardrails on platforms over 30 inches for preschool-aged children. <https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/325.pdf>, p.21.

⁵² "Campfire Safety", Smokey Bear, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://smokeybear.com/en/prevention-how-tos/campfire-safety>

- c. How children gather around a fire will be an important method of ensuring safety, and programs can create these expectations through explicit teaching, providing a visual boundary (e.g. a string), and by placing chairs or benches at the appropriate distance.
- d. Children should remain approximately three feet away from the fire (the approximate width of a doorway) so that an adult can travel around the campfire unimpeded, if there is a need.
- e. Adults' undivided attention and 1:1 touch supervision (keeping children within arms reach at all times) is necessary during activities where a child is assisting a staff member in building or tending the fire.
- f. Programs should ensure staff have received training on appropriate fire management and first aid.
- g. Programs should ensure staff have easy access to fire suppression materials (e.g. fire extinguishers, buckets of water, or sand).



Ashdown Forest School

39. Proximity to Bodies of Water and Water Activities

- a. Exploring natural areas with water features and bodies of water can be a highly beneficial aspect to a nature-based curriculum. Playing in or with water can also support children's safety and comfort in hot temperatures.
- b. Hazardous bodies of water, where there is a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage or avoid and that staff cannot control, can include:
 - i. Swift-moving rivers
 - ii. Deep lakes or ponds
 - iii. Steep shorelines of any body of water
 - iv. Frozen bodies of water
 - v. Contamination with harmful chemicals
- c. Safety considerations for different types of bodies of water include:
 - i. Rivers (and creeks)
 - Swift-moving rivers of a consistent depth over the knee of a child is likely to affect the child's balance due to the strength of the current and should be avoided.
 - More shallow or "lazy" parts of a river or creek may have variable depths that allow for children to play in the water without being affected by the strength of the current.

- ii. Oceans, lakes, and ponds
 - Steep shorelines of any body of water and shorelines with a rip tide pose a major hazard to children and adults alike, and these areas should be avoided.
 - Shallow or exposed shorelines may have easily traversed areas, possibly with small tide pools, where risks are easily managed by children.
- iii. Frozen water (snow and ice)
 - Playing in and with snow can be a common and enjoyable activity with many benefits to children's learning and development, as long as children are wearing appropriate clothing and are not too cold.
 - Programs should avoid
 - building or entering snow caves because they may collapse.
 - playing in snow drifts or in areas where snow plows are operating.
 - Playing underneath icicles.
 - Playing on areas with slippery ice, especially where it is not easily seen, such as on paved surfaces.
 - Programs should follow any local or state safety requirements for playing near or on frozen bodies of water.
- d. Programs operating within ¼ mile of a hazardous body of water, even if not engaging children in water activities:
 - i. Should have staff who can swim,
 - ii. Should have life-saving equipment appropriate to the body of water, such as ring buoys, accessible at all times.
 - iii. May restrict access to the body of water through physical boundaries.
 - iv. May lower the ratio of adults to children.
- e. Staff must be trained in CPR, as suffocation can occur in water or through other means. Staff are likely required to do so as part of general child care licensing rules.
- f. Staff ratios for swimming or wading in water, whether in an ONB program or otherwise, should be 1:1 for toddlers, 1:4 for preschool-age, and 1:6 for school-age children, not including a lifeguard.⁵³
 - i. When children are engaged in water activities in a body of water that is more than 24 inches deep at the lowest point, a lifeguard or a program staff member that has water safety training should be present.

⁵³ "Child:Staff Ratio, Group Size, and Minimum Age", National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://nrckids.org/CFOC/Database/1.1.1.5>

- ii. 24 inches is a common depth for designating a residential swimming pool, but this may be different in each state.
- g. When children are engaged in water activities, such as play at a shallow creek or shoreline:
 - i. Staff must provide undivided attention and touch supervision (keeping children within arms' reach at all times).⁵⁴
 - ii. Staff must be positioned to respond to emergencies, such as having at least one staff member on the downstream end of a river or creek.
 - iii. Children should not dig holes in the sand that is deeper than knee height, nor deeper than two feet, and should be closely supervised.
 - iv. Children must have appropriate clothing, including footwear, and dry clothing to change into.

40. Foraging

- a. Programs must have policies in place to ensure children do not touch or consume any toxic plants, fruits, mushrooms or other matter.
- b. Programs must ensure the areas where plants are being harvested have not been sprayed with pesticides or contaminated with other pollutants, as they commonly are along roadways and in municipal landscaping.
- c. Program staff that will forage with children should be able to demonstrate they can:
 - i. Properly identify the different plant species that are native to the area and region where the ONB program is located
 - ii. Identify and avoid poisonous plants and plants that look similar to poisonous plants
 - iii. Ensure that plants are harvested sustainably and during the correct time of year and season
- d. Mushrooms are commonly found in healthy and safe outdoor environments, and mushrooms can provide beneficial educational experiences for children, as well as food. However, some mushrooms and other fungi have the potential to be very dangerous, even fatal. Therefore children must not pick, harvest, or consume mushrooms unless directly supervised by qualified mushroom foragers or mycologists, even if a child thinks they can correctly identify the plant.

41. Hand Tools

- a. Hand tools include small saws, knives or other kitchen tools, hammers, mallets, screwdrivers, and drills. Hand tools are not power-tools, nor are they toys.

⁵⁴ "Supervision and Discipline", National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://nrckids.org/CFOC/Database/2.2.0.4>

- b. Use of hand tools may be limited to 1-2 children at a time with active supervision of a staff person.
- c. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) provides guidance for the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for specific tool use for adults⁵⁵. PPE for children should be as thorough, if not more, and child-sized.
- d. Children should use tools in clearly defined areas away from others, especially away from where children may be engaging in vigorous play. Within a designated area, children using tools should also be sufficiently separate from each other.
- e. Staff should evaluate children's developmental levels, capabilities, and readiness when considering the appropriateness and safety of particular tools.
- f. Hand tools should be stored away and inaccessible to children when not under direct supervision.



Nature Ninos Prescott

42. Playing at Higher Speeds

- a. Play at high speeds is a consideration for ONB programs due to the potential presence of slopes for biking or sledding.
- b. Programs should choose locations based on the weather and conditions of the surfaces, ensuring children stay at reasonable speeds for their age and ability, and where there can be separate designated areas for going up or down the slope to avoid collisions.
- c. Programs should provide a designated supervisor for small groups engaging in biking or sledding activities. Group size is often limited by the number of bikes or sleds made available, and should be appropriate to the size of the physical location.
- d. Biking and sledding should not be in areas that have obstacles in the path.
- e. Programs should provide helmets that fit all children's heads.
- f. Sleds should not contain sharp edges.



Kristen Hammer, Nature Together

⁵⁵ "Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Assessment", OSHA, accessed Sept 22, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/training/library/personal-protective-equipment/assessment>

Staff Training, Qualifications, and Supervision Requirements

State licensing agencies should identify, establish, and provide ONB-specific competencies, training, and qualifications requirements that are appropriate for each state and ecosystem. States should partner with program providers, higher education, and other workforce preparation and professional development partners to do so. States may need to revise existing pre-service or yearly training requirements, such as orientations, emergency preparedness plans, or medication management, to describe any differences in ONB program expectations. Ensuring safety in the outdoors during the program will require staff awareness of site-specific benefit-risk assessment and safety plans. Depending on the level of risk and needs for supervision, ONB ECE programs may require different staffing ratios than traditional, indoor child care.

43. Workforce Development for ONB ECE and Outdoor Safety

- a. States should ensure ONB-specific training, professional development, and higher education courses are sufficiently available, and have a process for evaluating equivalencies and out-of-state certifications.
- b. State systems can maximize the positive impact of ONB licensing and systems development by making training in nature-based early childhood education and outdoor safety available for the entire early learning and childcare workforce, not just for staff intending to teach in outdoor settings.
- c. States and partners should consider providing basic ONB training for free within the state to ensure alignment and consistency across practitioners.
- d. Licensing staff must also have sufficient training regarding the local environment and weather, toxic or dangerous species and other local hazards, and nature-based teaching practices to successfully license and monitor ONB programs.

44. Pre-Service Training Additions for ONB Program Staff

- a. Additions for outdoor safety may include understanding the weather patterns of the local climate, how to identify or respond to dangerous or poisonous plants and animals in your state, and any specific requirements associated with risky play activity



- supervision that are written in a state's ONB licensing regulations.
- b. Lead teachers responsible for supervising groups of children must have training and/or experience in outdoor safety and nature-based teaching, as well as early childhood education and development, prior to their roles in an ONB program.
 - i. States may consider equivalencies that take into account combinations of experience and training.
 - ii. States may consider use of existing quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) resources, coaches or teacher evaluations to support training and qualifications assessment to support licensure and monitoring of ONB programs.
 - c. If a program is operating more than 20 minutes from emergency medical care, states may require a current Wilderness First Aid and CPR certificate for at least one staff member, in alignment with the expectations set by the American Camp Association.⁵⁶

45. In-Service Training Additions for ONB Programs

- a. ONB programs will need to train their staff on the hazards and risks of their outdoor locations and any benefit-risk assessments and safety plans upon hire and at least annually.
- b. ONB programs will need to train their staff on the risky play and outdoor-specific program activity policies and teaching practices, such as those relating to foraging, campfires and water play.
- c. ONB programs will need to train their staff on the policies and procedures regarding weather and program adaptations, emergency response plans, and communicating with families.
- d. ONB programs should provide yearly or seasonal review of risky play policies and procedures.

46. Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play

- a. Staff must actively supervise children at all times and should visually account for all children regularly.
- b. There should be at least two staff with children at all times. Program staff should have walkie-talkies to help them communicate with one another when walking along a trail or in the event the groups get separated.
- c. Benefit-risk assessments and the resulting safety plans or policies should indicate the teaching and supervision practices that are necessary for a particular area or activity.
- d. Adjustments to supervision practices should be considered on a daily basis to accommodate for staff capacities, children's needs, and the weather.

⁵⁶ "First Aid: What Training Do Camp Staff Need?", American Camp Association, accessed September 5, 2025, <https://www.acacamps.org/article/campline/first-aid-what-training-do-camp-staff-need>

- e. Some risky play activities may require focused supervision, limitations to the activity, or additional staff. For example:
- i. Use of hand tools may be limited to 1-2 children at a time with active supervision of a staff person.
 - ii. Climbing natural features may be limited to 1-2 children at a time, and a staff person should be within arm's reach of the children.
 - iii. Engaging with campfire activities within a 3-foot radius from the fire may require 1:1 supervision and attention, with additional staff to provide appropriate supervision for children outside the 3-foot radius.
 - iv. Swimming or wading in a body of water, depending on the size and depth of the body of water, may require additional adults and/or a lifeguard.
 - v. Play at higher speeds may be limited to small groups and require a designated supervisor.



Rooted and Free Nature School

47. Staffing Ratios and Risk-Based Adjustments

- a. Outdoor nature-based programs have unique staffing and supervision expectations that are essential for ensuring child safety. States should determine the appropriate staff-to-child ratio, according to a number of factors, including:
 - i. Qualifications of lead and assistant teachers
 - ii. Risky play activities allowed by the state or program
 - iii. Potentially hazardous features in or near the program location
- b. For ONB programs whose practices are fully aligned with the standards as described in this document, including all risky play opportunities and staff training expectations, Natural Start Alliance recommends a 2:12 ratio as a baseline for preschool-aged children, and 2:16 as a baseline for school-age children (up to age 13). However:
 - i. The required ratio for an individual program, or for a whole system of ONB licensure, can be changed based on:
 - Level of risk present at the program location
 - Allowable activities of the program
 - Ages, developmental stages, and abilities of children

- ii. A 2:12 ratio for preschool-age children is less than the standard ratio for centers, and this may have a challenging financial impact on program providers if the reimbursement rates or tuition charged per child is insufficient to create a sustainable business model.
- iii. Early learning programs of all types face challenges in balancing the cost to families and the wages paid to staff. States are strongly encouraged to address this issue by providing cost-of-care reimbursements or other sufficient economic support to early learning programs of all types, including ONB.
- iv. By licensing ONB programs as a distinct program type, states may be able to set reimbursement rates to the specific cost of care based on the ONB program model of the state, not the center rate, thereby addressing the potentially challenging impact of having ONB programs ratios that are different from center-based programs.

Family Engagement

As in all early learning and child care programs, families and caregivers play an essential part in supporting children's growth and development in ONB programs. For ONB programs there are additional considerations for family engagement that are necessary or supportive of child safety, and. Many families will rely on ONB program staff to teach them essential safety practices, and can benefit themselves from participating in outdoor activities.

48. Communication About Health and Safety in the Outdoors

- a. Programs should communicate in advance with families about the positive impacts of nature, as well as the health and safety precautions being taken in the outdoor program. Positive impacts may extend to the family members or caregivers, as well.
- b. Programs should learn about families' experiences and concerns about being outdoors, and create culturally responsive practices.
- c. Benefit-risk assessments and risky play policies should be shared with families, and families should be encouraged to have consistent expectations for children at home and in other settings.
 - i. These policies and expectations should be in the program's parent and staff handbooks.
 - ii. Programs can provide information to families to inform their decisions about risk and safety.

49. Ensuring Children are Dressed for the Weather

- a. Children must be dressed appropriately for the weather and activities, as clothing is essential for outdoor safety. Families should be informed of the appropriate clothing for the various kinds of weather.

- b. Many families may not be able to afford, or know how to find, the correct clothing and gear for their children. Programs should be prepared to supply appropriate items, such as raincoats and rain pants, water boots, gloves, sun hats, and various layers of clothing in wool or moisture-wicking fabrics for cold and wet weather, or layers to protect from the sun and support evaporative cooling in hot weather.

50. Communicating with Families About Program Locations

- a. Families should be informed of all the locations that may be used by the ONB program for play and emergency shelter. This may be accomplished by providing families and caregivers with tours of the entire program area, and a map with the names and locations of different play areas.
- b. Families should have a way to locate the group at any time.

51. Child Records

- a. Programs should bring essential child information, such as emergency contact and medication authorizations to any outdoor, nature-based location.
- b. Laminating or putting pages into plastic sleeves can help protect child records from becoming wet. A grease or wax pencil can be used to make daily notes in wet weather, and any information that needs to be stored long-term (i.e. medication administration) should be transferred to the correct record storage area after the program day.

Appendix A: Sample Benefit-Risk Assessment

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families provides the following form to assist ONB programs in developing a benefit-risk assessment.⁵⁷ The form can be accessed here: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/el-license/Benefit-Risk-Assessment.pdf>

 Washington State Department of CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES	Benefit-Risk Assessment and Mitigation Development for Outdoor Nature-Based (ONB) Child Care Programs
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Pursuant to WAC 110-302-0400 and WAC 110-302-0471, ONB program license applicants must complete benefit-risk assessments and develop risk management policies to include in parent and staff handbooks, prior to receiving an ONB program license from the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. Requirements for benefit-risk assessments and risk management policies may be found in the rules referenced in WAC 110-302-0471 and in WAC 110-300-0005 Definitions.

Pursuant to WAC 110-302-0110, staff must be trained on these benefit-risk assessments and risk management policies. Pursuant to WAC 110-302-0310, providers must engage children in developmentally appropriate assessment of risky play during the program.

Before completing this form, please ensure you are familiar with the following:

Definitions, pursuant to WAC 110-302-0005:

"Benefit-risk assessment" means, for purposes of outdoor nature-based programs, a process used to identify and document hazards and risky play elements associated with childhood outdoor play and making plans to mitigate the risk of injury to children while maintaining developmental benefits for children. This process includes identifying the types of risk present in a location or activity, the likelihood and severity of potential injury, the potential benefits to children, methods of mitigating hazards, e.g., elimination, substitution, isolation, safeguards, and managing risk, e.g., heightened supervision, scaffolding, intervention, and identifying who is responsible for implementing the appropriate methods and when.

"Hazard" means a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid.

"Risk" when used in reference to "risky play", means a situation in which a child can recognize and evaluate challenge and decide on a course of action, although there is the potential for injury. In this context, risk can be necessary and beneficial to healthy child development.

"Risky play" means physical activity and play that is challenging and involves a risk of physical injury. Risky play for ONB programs includes, but is not limited to, play involving heights, speed, dangerous tools, close proximity to dangerous elements, such as falling into something potentially hazardous, and risk of getting lost. Risky play is also known as "adventure play."

WAC 110-302-0471 ONB benefit-risk assessments, risk management policies, and waivers.

(1) ONB programs must have and follow benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans. These assessments and plans must be submitted to DCYF on a form provided by the department and be available for department review at the time of initial licensing. An amended assessment or plan cannot be implemented until the department has approved it. Benefit-risk assessments must include, but are not limited to, the following criteria:

- (a) Information about the site or sites that will be used by the ONB program on a regular basis.
- (b) Different seasons of the year such as summer versus winter plans, based on how conditions change within ONB sites and locations used by the ONB program on a regular basis.
- (c) Risky play activities including, but not limited to, the following:
 - (i) Climbing natural features pursuant to WAC 110-302-0146;
 - (ii) Water activities pursuant to WAC 110-302-0350;
 - (iii) Using sharp tools pursuant to WAC 110-302-0352;
 - (iv) Plant foraging pursuant to WAC 110-302-0346;
 - (v) ONB program pets pursuant to WAC 110-302-0225;
 - (vi) Egg collection and consumption pursuant to WAC 110-302-0196;
 - (vii) Campfire activities pursuant to WAC 110-302-0351; and
 - (viii) Activities near water, cliffs, steep slopes, or other potentially hazardous natural features.

RISK-BENEFIT ASSESSMENT AND MITIGATION DEVELOPMENT FOR OUTDOOR NATURE-BASED (ONB) CHILD CARE PROGRAMS
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⁵⁷ "Benefit-Risk Assessment and Mitigation Development for Outdoor Nature-Based (ONB) Child Care Programs", accessed October 2025, <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/el-license/Benefit-Risk-Assessment.pdf>

(d) Guidance for when increased staffing is necessary, and provide guidance for the development of the applicable risk management policies and procedures described in subsection (2) of this section.

(2) ONB programs must have and follow risk management policies and procedures to address potential hazards and risks of the ONB programs. These must include, but are not limited to, policies or procedures related to the following:

- (a) Encountering non-ONB program pets and wildlife pursuant to WAC 110-302-0225 and 110-302-0353;
- (b) Interacting with strangers, limiting unsupervised access to any child in care, pursuant to WAC 110-302-0345;
- (c) The shared use of public space;
- (d) Weather requiring the use of an emergency shelter;
- (e) Required clothing and keeping children dressed for the weather pursuant to WAC 110-302-0147;
- (f) Using public facilities or buildings;
- (g) Encountering poisonous species; and
- (h) All other potentially hazardous situations and natural features.

(3) Parents or guardians must sign an ONB program risk waiver that acknowledges and accepts the potential hazards and risks associated with ONB programs. The ONB programs' applicable risk management policies or procedures, as described in subsection (2) of this section, along with the parent waiver, must be included in the parent handbooks, pursuant to WAC 110-302-0450.

(4) A copy of waivers signed by the child's parent or guardian must be kept in each child's records.

Instructions: Complete the chart below for each location and/or activity for which your program has conducted a risk-benefit analysis and mitigation procedure. An example is provided.

Location or Activity	Benefits	Hazards and Risk – see definitions – Include seasonal changes in the environment, staff preparation, and developmental needs of children as appropriate	Relevant ONB Program WACs	Mitigation Procedure – what staff must do to support the benefits and address the hazard and risks of an activity or location. Include any need for additional staff or staff training.
<i>EXAMPLE: Tree Climbing</i>	<i>EXAMPLE: Gross motor skills, balance, risk analysis and awareness, planning, decision-making, taking turns, communication, self-esteem building, sensory development, hand/feet/eye coordination, strength building, flexibility, endurance, and energy release.</i>	<i>EXAMPLE: Falling, slipping, cuts and abrasions, hard ground surface – potential head injury, sharp or hard objects within and under tree, child not developmentally able to evaluate ability, new or untrained staff supervision and teaching issues, icy or frosty conditions that make the tree too slippery, staff not appropriately stationed for immediate assistance and ability to reach child's midriff, and child able to climb out of reach of staff person</i>	<i>EXAMPLE: 0146; 0345; and 0110</i>	<i>EXAMPLE: Staff inspect tree for loose branches or other hazards. Staff are within reach of child's midriff at all times. One child climbs at a time. Children waiting their turns are actively supervised with appropriate transition activity. Staff are trained to benefit risk assessment and policy before they assist with tree climbing activity. Staff evaluate each child's ability, weather and seasonal conditions, ground surface requirements/hazards prior to allowing tree climbing activity.</i>