

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

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Natural Start Alliance

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About this Resource

The development of these recommendations was led by Dr. Aliza Yair from 2024–2026 in collaboration with the Natural Start Alliance Leadership Team and members of Natural Start Alliance's various working groups of outdoor, nature-based (ONB) education professionals. An initial draft was available for public use and review from October 2025–March 2026, and this resource incorporates feedback from practitioners, government agencies, and others engaging in the development of ONB early learning and child care policy, regulations, or professional systems.

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Table of Contents

Introduction **4**
Background **5**
The Basics of ONB Curriculum **8**
Nature and Healthy Child Development 9
Hazards and Risks **10**
Hazards 10
Risks 11
What is risky play? 11
Benefit-Risk Assessment **13**
Types of ONB Programming **15**
ONB Licensing Pathways **17**
Recommendations **20**
Location Assessment and Program Planning **20**
1. Site Assessment and Selection 20
2. Benefit-Risk Assessments for Activities at a Proposed Site 23
3. Shelters and Other Structures 24
4. Shelters in Emergency Responses 24
5. Access to Natural Spaces and Use of Public Lands 25
6. Sharing Public Spaces 25
7. Storage and Carrying Supplies 26
Health and Hygiene **27**
8. Drinking Water 27
9. Food 27
10. Handwashing 28
11. Toileting 29
12. Sleep and Rest 29
13. Medication and First-Aid 30
Weather Safety **31**
14. Weather Considerations and Program Adjustments 31
15. Clothing 33
16. Temperatures - General 34
17. Heat 35
18. Cold 36
19. High Winds 37
20. Air Quality 38
21. Severe Storms 39
22. Lightning 39
23. Flash Flooding 40
24. Tornados 40

Emergency Planning **41**
25. Evacuation 41
26. Shelter-in-Place/Lockdown 41
27. Communications to Prevent or Respond to Hazards 42
28. Missing Children Protocols 43
29. Dangerous Animals, Plants, and Other Species 43
30. Earthquakes 44
Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities **44**
31. Benefit-Risk Assessment for Activity Planning 45
32. Program Materials 45
33. Inclusion and Belonging 46
34. Disability 47
35. Honoring Indigenous Sovereignty and Knowledge 48
36. Setting Boundaries to the Play Space 49
37. Climbing Natural Features 49
38. Campfires 50
39. Proximity to Bodies of Water and Water Activities 51
40. Foraging 53
41. Gardening and Farming 54
42. Hand Tools 54
43. Playing at Higher Speeds 55
Staff Training, Qualifications, and Supervision Requirements **55**
44. Workforce Development for ONB ECE and Outdoor Safety 56
45. Pre-Service Training Additions for ONB Program Staff 56
46. In-Service Training Additions for ONB Programs 57
47. Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play 57
48. Staffing Ratios and Risk-Based Adjustments 58
Family and Caregiver Engagement **59**
49. Communication About Health and Safety in the Outdoors 59
50. Ensuring Children are Dressed for the Weather 59
51. Communicating with Families About Program Locations 60
52. Child Records 60
Conclusion **61**
Appendix A: Sample Benefit-Risk Assessment **62**

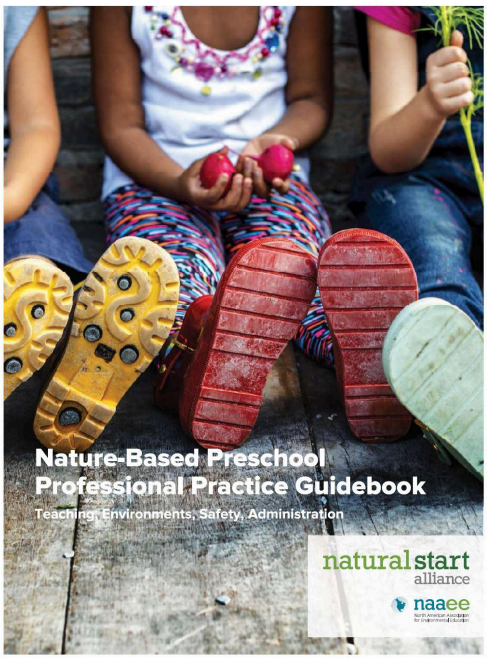
Introduction

The *Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor, Nature-Based (ONB) Early Learning and Child Care Programs* (referred to as "*The Recommendations*") is a resource that aims to support communities in expanding children's access to nature-based learning in ways that can be adapted to each state's regulatory and environmental context.

The Recommendations draw from the expertise of representatives of the ONB early learning professional community, and incorporate 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. In addition, *The Recommendations* can inform the related needs for the early learning workforce's training and professional development, along with other systems-level considerations.

The Recommendations do not, however, describe all considerations for running a high-quality program; the resource complements 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*").



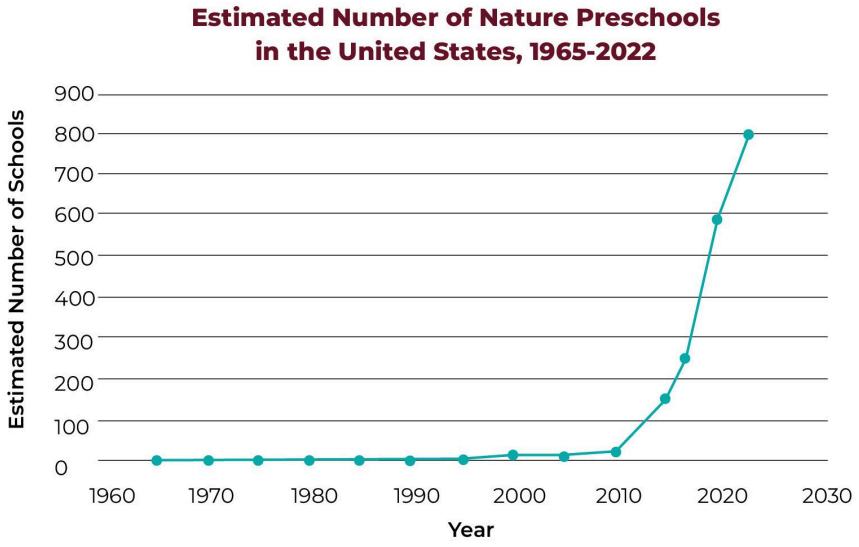
The Guidebook represents the combined expertise of professionals across the field of nature-based education and describes how nature-based educators can offer diverse preschool programs that are safe, effective, and inclusive. *The Guidebook* provides in-depth considerations and guidance for high quality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

Background

Teaching children outdoors in natural environments is a traditional practice of people all over the world. 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, and improved executive functioning and social skills, the benefits of outdoor play and nature-based experiences are vast, and the research base continues to expand.[2]

Yet despite growing evidence on the benefits of outdoor and nature-based experiences on child development, many children lack access to natural environments, or even opportunities to be outdoors.[3] In fact, families with children are twice as likely to live in nature-deprived areas than families without children in the home.[4] Early learning and child care settings could help bridge this gap, but a 2024 study found that only 42% of state-funded preschool programs have regulations requiring any outdoor time, and 41% did not have regulations or guidance on children's access to the outdoors at all.[5]

Fortunately, 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. According to the Natural Start



[1] Fyfe-Johnson et al. (2021) Nature and Children's Health: A Systematic Review. *Pediatrics,* 148(4)
[2] Frumkin, et al. (2017). Nature contact and human health: A research agenda. *Environmental Health Perspectives.* 125(7):075001. https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP1663.
[3] Jost, T. M., Barnett, W. S., & Hodges, K. (2024). *State Policies and Guidance Relating to Outdoor and Nature-Based Experiences in Preschool.* National Institute for Early Education Research.
[4] Zeno, Sam, et al. (2026) T*he Nature Gap: Communities of Color and Those With Low Incomes Are Bearing the Brunt of America's Nature Loss.* Center for American Progress (Feb 2026).
[5] Jost, T. M., Barnett, W. S., & Hodges, K. (2024).



Aventuras Forest School

Alliance's 2022 national survey,[6] 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 United States, serving an estimated 25,600 children, and the field has continued to grow since then. 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.

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 other 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, ONB programs 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 primary use of outdoor environments as learning spaces can create a barrier to licensing, however, as state licensing regulations often require the center, home, or school to meet certain building codes as a means of ensuring child safety. According to the Natural Start Alliance 2022 survey, the more outdoor time that a nature preschool provides, the less likely it is to be licensed. For ONB programs with no building, or no fences around their outdoor learning environment, there may be no licensing pathway.

Without a license, ONB programs may be unable to accept child care subsidies that support lower-income families to access child care. ONB programs may also be limited to providing only a few hours of care each day, and therefore be unsuitable for working families.

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

The Natural Start Alliance developed the *Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor, Nature-Based Early Learning and Child Care Programs* to address this policy gap, supporting states in the development of licensing pathways for ONB programs to promote access to outdoor learning opportunities that are safe, effective, and inclusive.

From January 2024 to May 2025, draft recommendations were developed in close collaboration with the Natural Start Alliance Leadership Team and members of the Natural Start Alliance's working groups of ONB professionals. The resulting draft was available for public use and review from October 2025–March 2026, and feedback was collected through publicly available surveys and listening sessions. This version of *The Recommendations* incorporates feedback from practitioners, government agencies, and others engaging in the development of ONB early learning and child care policy, regulations, or professional systems.



Dodge Nature Preschool

The Basics of ONB Curriculum

An outdoor nature-based (ONB) program puts nature at the heart of the curriculum. Nature is a setting for the program and a focus of children's experiences. ONB programming can take place in forests, prairies, parks, green schoolyards, gardens, outdoor classrooms, or other nearby spaces with natural features. Opportunities for learning emerge from children's interactions with the natural environment and each other, and adapt to individual, collective, and environmental needs. As a result, the ONB curriculum is often referred to as an *emergent* curriculum.

Key characteristics of an ONB curriculum include:

- Using nature as the central organizing theme to promote child development and develop 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)[7]

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, and to be adaptable and resilient

The Recommendations provided here describe outdoor, nature-based programming for licensed early learning and child care programs of the United States, and does not intend to describe or make curriculum recommendations related to Indigenous practices, or apply to programs operating on their Tribal lands. Instead, states and program providers are encouraged to recognize the importance of including Indigenous knowledges and understandings of tribal sovereignty into state standards and curricular initiatives.[8]



[7] North American Association for Environmental Education, *Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook* (NAAEE, 2019), 8.
[8] Lees, A., & Bang, M. (2023). Indigenous pedagogies: Land, water, and kinship. Occasional Paper Series, (49). DOI: https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1500

Nature and Healthy Child Development

Research demonstrates that nature enhances children's health and development in a variety of ways. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University summarized recent research in their 2024 publication, *State Policies and Guidance Relating to Outdoor and Nature-Based Experiences in Preschool*.

Time outdoors is associated with:

- Increased physical activity
- Decreased myopia (nearsightedness)
- Better executive functioning
- Improved attention skills
- Decreased inattention-hyperactivity symptoms

Exposure to nature is associated with:

- Improved physical and mental health
- Boosted immune system
- Improved amount and quality of play when natural spaces offer more opportunities for self-directed play that is complex and involves risk-taking
- More imaginative and cooperative play

Nature-based education is associated with positive outcomes in:

- Environmental literacy
- Cognitive development
- Social and emotional development
- Physical development
- Language and literacy development



Nature Forward

Jost, T. M., Barnett, W. S., & Hodges, K. (2024). *State Policies and Guidance Relating to Outdoor and Nature-Based Experiences in Preschool.* National Institute for Early Education Research.

Hazards and Risks

Systems of safety and education in outdoor, nature-based (ONB) programs distinguish between the concepts of hazards and risks. Hazards and risks exist in indoor and outdoor environments, and are present in all types of settings for early learning and child care programs.[9] ONB programs, state agencies, and caregivers should consider all available information when determining the balance of the benefits of an environment with the extent of the potential for injury.

Hazards

A hazard 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 with a safety plan.

The Recommendations provide appropriate responses and protocols for many (but not all possible) hazards specific to outdoor, natural environments. Some hazards, such as extreme weather events, are increased by rapid climate change.[10] Actions to address climate change are also necessary for children's safety,[11] but are not related to licensing and are therefore not included in this document.

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[9] Children's Environmental Health Network. *Resources*. https://cehn.org/resources/ accessed Oct. 2, 2026.
[10] The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/chapter/chapter-11/
[11] Capita Social, Inc and the Aspen Institute. (2023). Flourishing Children, Healthy Communities, and a Stronger Nation: The U.S. Early Years Climate Action Plan. Early Years Climate Action. https://capita.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/U.S.-Early-Years-Climate-Action-Plan_Oct-2023_SMALL.pdf

Risks

A risk is a potential source of harm that can be identified and managed by a child or group of children with adult support and assistance, as needed, to help children avoid serious injury. Risks are present in all early learning programming, including ONB programs. Risk can be beneficial and necessary to learning. “Risky play” (also known as adventure play) is beneficial and necessary to children’s healthy development in any setting, as they first learn the skills, coordination, and understanding of living within their environment.

What is risky play?

“Risky play” in early childhood education is thrilling or exciting play that involves some risk of injury.[12] Risky play, as defined in the research, includes six categories: play at speed, at height, with dangerous tools (such as hammers), near dangerous elements (such as fire or water), rough and tumble play (for example, play fighting), and play where there is a chance of “getting lost” (for example, hiding in bushes and being unseen).[13]

There are many benefits of risky play to children’s development, including increased physical activity, social interaction, independence, confidence, resilience, self-regulation, and risk assessment or appraisal.[14] 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* provides 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.



First Roots Wild Roots

[12] 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

[13] 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.

[14] 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.

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.[15] There are also systematic and standardized processes that can be put in place to ensure programs are effectively supporting children in risky play. In the Washington State outdoor preschool pilot program, risky play was supported with guidance to develop site-specific risky play safety plans, called benefit-risk assessments. In the 2018-2019 and the 2019-2020 school years, over 1,000 children were enrolled in outdoor preschool programs in the pilot and there were no serious injuries from risky play.[16]

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 include 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

[15] 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. (2015) 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.

[16] 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 offer significant benefits.

Decisions about what level of risk is manageable for the program depend on a variety of factors, which may include: staff training, experience, and comfort with activity; experience and preferences of children and families in the program; children's abilities, disabilities, and specific needs; teacher-child ratios; licensing requirements; and insurance requirements..

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. Benefit-risk assessments are often 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
4. Plans to mitigate the risks, often involving developmentally appropriate teaching practices
5. Considerations for the various skills, abilities or disabilities, and unique needs of children in order to support each child's full, safe participation

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 needs to have fall zones cleared of sharp hazards, and branches checked for stability. Staff need to provide consistent and physically close supervision, use teaching practices to encourage children's own assessment of risk and the actions they will take to manage that risk (for example, helping children assess the texture of the bark and grip of their shoes), 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. Using benefit-risk assessments in licensing

ONB programs, or with any program engaging in risky play, can support children's safety and provide 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	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 in benefit-risk assessment and associated policies before assisting 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

Outdoor nature-based (ONB) early learning and child care programs operate primarily outdoors in a nature-rich setting and provide a nature-based curriculum. Some ONB programs have a permanently located and maintained outdoor classroom, and others may be a roaming program where resources are brought to the location each day. Some ONB programs may be associated with a child care center, family home, or school that also offers non-ONB programming.



The Nest Nature School

ONB program models often differ based on their access to indoor facilities, with some offering consistent access to center-, home-, or school-based facilities, and others offering minimal indoor access. When programs operate with minimal indoor access, they meet children's biological and educational needs with practices and resources that are different from those used indoors (for example, providing portable handwashing stations for health and hygiene, or providing tents for napping).

Programs with Consistent Indoor Access

Programs with consistent indoor access are most often associated with an existing child care center, family home, or school-based Pre-K program. Child care centers or school-based Pre-K programs may provide an ONB program by licensing a natural area outside of the center or school grounds, also known as an "outdoor classroom."

This approach can be attractive to programs (and state early learning systems) because it can increase capacity in programs, often without significant additional costs. Outdoor classrooms can increase the number of children enrolled and served by a building-based program by offering a hybrid, indoor/outdoor model where groups of children alternate being in the outdoor classroom or indoor classroom. This can give more children an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of outdoor nature-based learning while also expanding the overall capacity of the center or school-based program.

Often, outdoor classrooms can be developed without requiring major capital investment to expand a facility, making this a cost-efficient solution to both increase capacity and introduce more outdoor time for children.

Programs with Minimal Indoor Access

Alternatively, ONB programs may operate without indoor facilities associated with a licensed center- or school-based program (for example, ONB programs in a public park, at a nature center, or on private land). These programs may have regularly-used outdoor classrooms and play areas, and/or move around and utilize spaces with minimal environmental impact.

ONB programs with minimal indoor access use alternative shelters such as a picnic shelter, lodge, or yurt to meet some of the children's daily needs (for example, by providing shade or shelter while eating or napping or by providing access to toilets and handwashing). Depending on the type of shelter, these alternative shelters also may 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 shelters, or shelters may be located at the site of the program, such as a nature center.



Ashdown Forest School

In these programs, shelter spaces are not intended for educational programming and therefore are not equipped in the same way or with the same materials as center-, home-, or school-based classrooms. In an all-outdoor program, children's educational needs are primarily met through the outdoor environment and with a responsive, nature-based curriculum. Teachers often bring additional materials (such as books, writing/drawing supplies, and field guides) to support literacy and fine motor development. Teachers may rotate these resources throughout the week and seasons and provide options that meet children's interests and developmental levels, just like in a home- or center-based program.

This resource describes the recommended licensing standards for programs that operate primarily outdoors and use alternatives to center-, home-, or school-based indoor facilities.

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 operating in any license-exempt status. ONB programs may also 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.[17]

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. In 2021, Washington successfully established an ONB child care license type with specific standards that aligned with center- or family home-based child care regulations where possible.

Since then, other state agencies and representatives have begun working with communities to create a licensing pathway for outdoor nature-based programs. Notably, in 2023, both Oregon and Maryland passed legislation to begin a pilot for licensing outdoor preschools. In 2024, Colorado passed legislation to include outdoor nature-based preschool programs as a type of child care center for licensing-related matters. In 2025, after years of partnership between state agencies and ONB practitioners and advocates, Michigan licensing rules were revised to include outdoor nature-based child care centers. As of October 2026 there are more than 15 states with some type of ONB policy activity,[18] often falling within the licensing pathways described below.

The Recommendations were developed by a community of practitioners and experts from across the United States and are applicable to various climates, both ecological and regulatory. Yet 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**
    a. 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 children enrolled in the center-based program and 10 in the outdoor program.

[17] North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). *Nature Preschools in the United States: 2022 National Survey* (NAAEE, 2023).
[18] Natural Start Alliance. *Tracking National ONB Policy.* Accessed September 23, 2026.

b. This option allows for flexibility when licensing outdoor, nature-based programs or outdoor classrooms, but could be applied inconsistently by different licensing offices or staff.
c. This pathway does not require change to law or regulations and is unlikely to be a specifically funded effort.
d. This option may require ONB programs to be affiliated with, or have access to, a licensed center or school if there are not facilities to provide shelter due to weather or to meet children's biological needs.

2. **Changes to existing center-based playground regulations that allow for more naturalized environments for all programs**
    a. This pathway is most likely to advance nature-based educational opportunities for all children, as well as more rapidly advance workforce and community knowledge and experience in nature-centered early childhood education.
    b. On its own, this option does not address the policies and practices needed to ensure child safety in a non-fenced environment or without access to a program facility.
    c. This pathway requires revising current center-based regulations for outdoor learning environments, with consideration for urban landscapes and the consistent use of field trips and public parks.
    d. This option may require states to revise their CCDF[19] plan, QRIS[20] assessments, and coaching materials, as well as make changes to state and/or regional interpretations of federal program environmental standards.
        i. The Head Start ECLKC[21] provides explicit support and resources for nature-based learning and development in alignment with national standards.[22]
        ii. Organizations such as 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. **Using pilot or demonstration sites to develop and test ONB licensing regulations, licensing processes, and other systems of support**
    a. This pathway offers an opportunity for collaboration across stakeholder groups, institutions, and state departments.
    b. It may require some change in regulations and/or law.

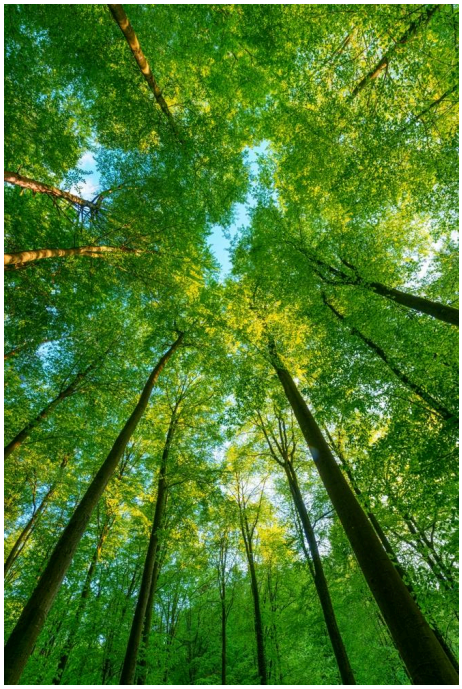
[19] Child Care Development Fund
[20] Quality Rating and Improvement System
[21] Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Center (ECLKC)
[22] "Learning Environments: Nature-based Learning and Development", Head Start, accessed August 21, 2025, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/nature-based-learning-development

c. If this option is legislatively mandated, it can be funded and staffed for project management and additional oversight during development and testing.
d. This pathway can provide time for workforce preparation and quality improvement partners to develop standards and practices.
e. This option provides an opportunity for data collection and training specifically regarding ONB practices.

4. **Creating and adopting ONB license regulations without a pilot**
    a. This pathway may be suitable for states that are familiar with ONB programming and licensing regulations in other states with similar environments and climates. Additionally, training opportunities may already exist for ONB program providers or licensing staff in the region.
    b. This option may be suitable for states that have developed and tested ONB licensing waivers or variances.
    c. This pathway may reduce opportunities to adjust licensing regulations.

Regardless of which licensing pathway is taken, a collaborative approach to developing ONB regulations and systems is much more likely to be successful. State or local agency staff should take advantage of the expertise of ONB program providers and families (including children) in co-creating and revising regulations. States should also engage in government-to-government consultation with Native nations early and often, to honor Native American Tribal sovereignty and U.S. treaty obligations.[23]

It is also critical, and beneficial, to include experts from other related fields, such as workforce preparation, departments of health, sanitation, parks, etc. Including partners early in the process allows all interested parties to collaborate and work through concerns. Many people will have legitimate concerns, and it can be important to begin with the shared 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.

[23] "About Tribal Nations, Tribal Citizens, and the United States", Native American Rights Fund, accessed Oct. 2, 2026 https://narf.org/about-tribal-nations-united-states-treaties/

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, managed outdoor spaces, and more wild, “beyond-the-fence” spaces. Most nature-based programs also include indoor spaces. In all of these environments, programs work with nature and natural elements to support children’s learning and development. The location of an outdoor program is integral to program planning, and brings considerations related to local flora and fauna, seasonal changes to the environment, hazards or risks that may be present, and access to shelters.



Appalachian Forest School

1. **Site Assessment and Selection**
    a. Program locations should be selected to ensure the environment can support high-quality learning opportunities and safe care for children to meet their developmental needs. The assessment and selection of ONB program locations should address context-specific considerations for health, hygiene, outdoor safety, and program activities.

b. Considerations for whether a site can support a high-quality nature-based curriculum include:
    i. Opportunities to deepen children's connection with their environment and explore novel areas, plants, and wildlife
    ii. Sufficient space for rigorous physical activities, such as open fields or trails for hiking
    iii. Availability of loose, open-ended objects, such as rocks, sticks, sand, and logs
    iv. Features of interest, such as native plants, animal habitats, creeks, or ponds
    v. Shade and areas for comfort or quiet
    vi. Whether the location can support sustained use, particularly considering the impact of children's play over long periods of time, which depends on the following:
        1. The extent to which an environment is managed or wild
        2. The variety of locations that can be visited
        3. The time it takes for an area's flora and fauna to recover from program use
    vii. These considerations may be used to support the conversion of existing playgrounds or other outdoor areas into more natural spaces. This is of particular importance for urban and suburban areas.
    viii. See "Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities" for more detailed information on supporting a high-quality nature-based curriculum, including risky play.
c. Local or state environmental agencies can advise about the potential for pollution or contamination (for example, the possibility of lead in the soil).[24]
d. An arborist can evaluate the safety of trees at a potential location before bringing children on-site, and regularly thereafter, including after high-wind events.
e. Park managers or local wildlife experts can advise on the risks of animals or plants in the ecosystem. ONB program staff should be prepared to identify, avoid, or otherwise respond to any dangerous animals or plants in the local ecosystem.
    i. See "Dangerous Animals, Plants, and Other Species" for more information on relevant programmatic responses.
f. Although primarily outside, ONB programs may use a variety of shelters and structures to meet the biological needs of children (for example, programs may use restrooms for toileting and handwashing). Programs must also identify at least one suitable structure for unpredicted

[24] "Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education", U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, accessed May 11, 2026, https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/safe-places/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/safeplacesforECE/cspece_guidance/executive_summary.html

hazardous weather events, shelter-in-place, or lockdown situations. See "Shelters and Other Structures" and "Shelters in Emergency Responses" for more information.

g. ONB programs should have, and submit to the licensing agency, a map of the program area for licensing purposes.
    i. Program maps should have all required locations noted (for example, toilets, gross motor play spaces), proposed boundaries of the licensed space, and pathways to and locations of emergency shelters.
    ii. Program maps should identify safe and accessible drop-off and pick-up locations, and any important meeting locations for emergencies.
    iii. Families and other officials, such as the fire department and law enforcement, should have the map to aid in locating the program whenever needed.
h. Area Requirements
    i. Area requirements, measured by square footage per child, ensure regular access (at least daily) to areas where all health and educational needs of children can be met, such as areas for gross motor play and rest.
    ii. ONB programs often operate in areas larger than state minimum requirements for child care centers, and with enough space for children to interact in and with a variety of locations. However, outdoor nature-based programs must also consider the sustainability of children's impact on the land, and this will impact the amount of usable space.
    iii. To ensure that an ONB program has access to sufficient space for daily use and to support a nature-based curriculum, state area requirements will depend on the habitat and ecosystem considerations of the proposed site.
        1. For licensing agencies, a starting place for setting area requirements for ONB programs is to consider examples or guidance from early learning and educational programs at nature centers with native habitats.
        2. States may grant variances allowing for flexibility in area requirements, taking into account how wild or managed the location is, as well as the specific affordances the setting offers.[25]
    iv. Online tools can help measure the square footage of irregular areas.

[25] North American Association for Environmental Education, *Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook* (NAAEE, 2019), 40-44

2. **Benefit-Risk Assessments for Activities at a Proposed Site**
    a. When selecting a site, ONB programs should develop preliminary benefit-risk assessments of potential activities in the proposed location(s) in order to:
        i. Examine whether or not a location will sufficiently support a high-quality ONB program. See “Benefit-Risk Assessment for Activity Planning” for more information on what is included in a benefit-risk assessment.
        ii. Help the ONB program and licensing agency distinguish between a hazard and risk within a proposed location by assessing whether the potential for injury (for an activity at that location) can be identified and managed by children with the support of program staff, or not.[26]
            1. For example, land features such as steep slopes could represent a hazard, or provide a beneficial opportunity for risky play at higher speeds. See “Playing at Higher Speeds” for more information about managing the risks of steep slopes.
            2. 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.
    b. Benefit-risk assessments describe the policies for managing identified risks, and due to the variability of natural environments at proposed sites, these policies function as program-specific safety plans.
        i. Licensing agencies may have existing processes in place for review and approval of such plans.
        ii. These policies can be reviewed by families before enrollment, and for quality assurance during a licensing or monitoring process.
        iii. Policies should include aspects of any land-use agreement for daily checks of hazards prior to children’s use of a location for the intended activity.
        iv. The risks of a specific activity may differ across various locations within a single program site, and require different policies or procedures.
    c. See Appendix A for an example of a state licensing agency’s required benefit-risk assessment form.

[26] A hazard 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.
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 children and provide assistance, if necessary, to help them avoid serious injury. Risk can be beneficial and necessary to learning.

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 regularly utilize a variety of shelters and structures to meet the biological needs of children, such as toileting, eating, and sleeping. See “Health and Hygiene” for more information on how programs meet those needs.



Heartwood Nature School

    b. Structures such as picnic shelters, yurts, lean-to’s, tents, or domes can provide protection from elements such as wind, rain, or sun.
        i. For these purposes, structures may not need to meet the same capacity and building requirements of a center (often called educational or “E” codes), but should be built according to relevant building codes or zoning requirements for the type of structure.
        ii. Programs and state agencies should consider weather, climate, and the geographic area when determining what types of shelters or other structures would be appropriate.
    c. While developing regulations, state agencies should collaborate with local government departments to ensure regulatory alignment. Counties may wish to update their zoning requirements to allow for and support the establishment of ONB programs in their area.

4. **Shelters in Emergency Responses**
    a. ONB programs need access to indoor shelters for emergency situations, such as lightning, unpredicted hazardous weather events, or lockdowns. These emergency shelters may be different from shelters that are regularly used by the program for common and predictable weather conditions such as rain, but must be accessible to programs at all times.
    b. Sometimes the closest buildings, though not owned by the program, may be the best option to shelter-in-place.
        i. Common publicly accessible options include nearby libraries or schools.
        ii. 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.

iii. Shelters for lockdown situations should have a locking door and minimal windows and be within a reasonable distance of the program location, such as a park bathroom or nearby business.

c. The type of emergency and how much warning there is can impact when and where to seek shelter. See “Outdoor Safety and Emergency Planning” for more information.
d. Programs should have a primary and secondary route to walk or transport children to designated locations when evacuating to an emergency shelter.

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 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 land manager and an ONB program director to partner on the use and management of the natural learning environment in order to offer an ONB program at the site.
c. Land-use agreements typically address the following elements:
    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, and coordinated responses to the presence of dangerous animals or toxic plants
    x. Dispute resolution processes, including timelines for program adjustments that consider families' need for consistent child care

6. Sharing Public Spaces

a. Programs operating in a public space should have protocols in place for sharing lands or facilities. Strategies to support children’s access to an appropriate educational space and facilities include:

i. 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.)
ii. Bringing supplies to sanitize public restrooms before children's use.
iii. Having children wear something highly visible that identifies them as part of the ONB program (for example, a bright vest, t-shirt, or outerwear) so staff can easily identify them, and so that members of the public also know the children are with the ONB program.
iv. Having multiple play spaces or back-up locations in the licensed area in the event that a space is occupied or otherwise unavailable or unusable.

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 safe and positive interactions with the community, which can serve as opportunities for children to understand and engage in appropriate public and social activities. For example, these interactions may allow children to meet people who work in the park, or learn about being quiet around birders.
    ii. For extreme and imminently dangerous situations, more is described in the "Emergency Planning" section of *The Recommendations*.

7. Storage and Carrying Supplies

a. Storage on-site may be possible, and ONB program staff also may carry necessary supplies in backpacks or pull supplies in a cart when changing location during the program day.
b. If there are limitations to the security and accessibility of storage and other necessary items on-site, then ONB programs must bring sufficient water, food, clothing, hygiene, and sanitary supplies to the site each day.



Asheville Farmstead School

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 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.

8. **Drinking Water**
    a. ONB programs may use alternative practices for eating food and drinking water than traditional, indoor programs.
    b. Programs must have potable water available for children and staff that meets water safety requirements.[27]
    c. Programs most often designate or provide one labeled water bottle or reusable cup per child to avoid cross-contamination and to monitor children's water intake. Programs may provide a large water cooler for refills throughout the day, and all items can be disinfected when needed with sanitizer, and are otherwise sanitized at the end of the program day/before the next day.



Hugging Tree Nature Preschool

9. **Food**
    a. ONB programs often allow for food that is brought by children's caregivers, and must be ready to provide nutritional food for children who do not have food, or to supplement food brought from home. When programs provide food for children, they must follow safe food handling practices, including safe food storage and handwashing before serving food to children.
    b. To ensure that food is kept at its recommended 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.

[27] "Drinking Water Regulations" U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, accessed May 11, 2026, https://www.epa.gov/dwreginfo/drinking-water-regulations

c. Programs may consider menu planning approaches and vegetarian alternatives that reduce the need for refrigeration throughout the day. Foods that do require refrigeration often need to be consumed within a few hours, depending on the conditions, and programs should check with their health department for these guidelines.
d. Food may be cooked to its recommended temperature through various methods, such as campfires, camping stoves, or other heating sources.
e. ONB programs may use a tarp or table cloth that is easily cleaned and sanitized to provide a surface for sitting and eating. Containers, tarps, and other items used for food storage, eating, and drinking should be cleaned and sanitized at least daily.
f. Gardening and foraging are often a part of nature-based education and may require soil testing for heavy metals, along with practices for safe food handling. More is described in "Foraging" and "Gardening and Farming" within the Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities section of *The Recommendations*.

10. Handwashing

a. ONB programs should have access to adequate handwashing facilities on site or be able to set up temporary handwashing stations, such as water coolers with taps.[28]
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.
c. Programs should have a way to dispose of the greywater safely without contaminating the program's location.



Ashdown Forest School

d. Handwashing with running water and soap is the best for cleaning children's hands.[29] For instances where soap and water are not immediately available, hands may be wiped clear of dirt and sanitizing liquid or wipes may be applied. Children's hands should then be washed with running water and soap as soon as possible.

[28] "Portable Handwashing Stations" Antioch University Inside-Outside, accessed Sep 28, 2026. https://www.insideoutside.org/portable-handwashing-stations
[29] "Clean Hands" U.S. Center for Disease Control, accessed May 11, 2026, https://www.cdc.gov/clean-hands/data-research/facts-stats/index.html

i. Hand sanitizers must be applied in sufficient quantity and allowed to dry on the skin in order to be effective.[30]
ii. Programs should be aware that high temperatures and low humidity may cause hand sanitizers to evaporate too quickly, reducing the effectiveness, and may need additional applications.[31]

11. Toileting

a. Public restrooms may be used, however, programs should bring supplies to disinfect 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 Park Service),[32] 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.
e. For supporting children who are not independent with toileting, programs should follow state guidelines for handling soiled clothes and other items, and ensuring the child is clean.
    i. Programs must have changes of clothes available for children and may need to carry additional resources, such as gloves, plastic bags, and changing mats.
    ii. Programs are strongly encouraged to work with families and other health experts in supporting children with disabilities who may require additional or alternative toileting strategies to access and attend ONB programs.

12. Sleep and Rest

a. Providing quiet and restful spaces for children is an important consideration for child development and basic biological needs.
b. Children may need seasonal weather protection, such as shade, rain coverage, or wind blocks and programs may use tarps, fabrics, or large tents or other shelters, as appropriate for their location. ONB programs may also have a designated structure, such as a yurt, that can be used to meet this particular programmatic need.

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[30] "Hand Sanitizer Guidelines and Recommendations", U.S. Center for Disease Control, accessed May 11, 2026, https://www.cdc.gov/clean-hands/about/hand-sanitizer.html
[31] Pathre, T. S., & Purkar, A. V. S. (2025). *Sanitizer evaporation*. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology, 14*(3). https://doi.org/10.15680/IJIRSET.2025.1403033
[32] "Leave No Trace 7 Principles", National Park Service, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.nps.gov/articles/leave-no-trace-seven-principles.htm

c. Programs may bring sleeping pads, hammocks, and sleeping bags for children, which should be laundered before being used by another child.
d. 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 comfortable sleeping outdoors at a given temperature.



Secret Forest Playschool

e. Hammocks may be used when made with a breathable material, hung low and over a soft surface, and only for preschool-aged children and above, or otherwise developmentally and physically capable of using a hammock.

13. 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 need to have additional first-aid supplies, such as hand-warmers (should not directly touch skin), emergency heat-reflecting blankets, or fire-suppression blankets.



Rooted and Free Nature School

c. Programs in locations that require staff be trained in Wilderness First Aid (WFA) may need additional items in their first aid kits, such as blister care and triangular bandages.
d. Temperature-sensitive medications must be stored at the correct temperature using temperature-controlled containers or coolers.
e. Programs should carry any medication directions and authorizations, and relevant medical or health plans, to the program locations for each child. Staff may require training in administering some medications.
f. Programs should have a policy for when ill children should stay at home or be sent home from the program, where to bring ill/injured children who need to be separated from the group, and how to maintain adequate supervision for the remaining children.

Weather Safety



ONB programs promote safety in the outdoors by planning for a variety of environmental or weather conditions. 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 necessary. Suitable clothing, access to shade and shelter, and other practices can make various weather conditions an exciting and educational part of our experiences in 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 that may occur, such as high winds or lightning, and the responses vary based on the type of hazardous weather. As average 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.

14. Weather Considerations and Program Adjustments

a. ONB programs, as primarily outdoors, must have a regular practice of checking the weather forecast and responding to weather conditions, such as temperature, precipitation, wind, and air quality.
b. 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 at least twice daily when any of the following apply:
        1. Programs provide full-day hours.
        2. There is potential for a hazardous weather event such as lightning, severe storms, or wildfire smoke.
        3. The program is located in areas where topographic or environmental features (such as mountains or large bodies of water) may give rise to rapid weather shifts.
    ii. Staff should use the most accurate weather forecasting methods for their location, and all staff should use the same methods. Weather apps should be from reliable and research-based weather forecasting sources.
    iii. In many locations, states and municipalities have processes to 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 or may not be accurate for their specific location.

c. Common program adjustments for weather conditions include:
    i. Staying closer to a shelter.
    ii. Coming inside for a warm-up/cool-down, where children might use bathroom facilities or 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 when other adjustments are not sufficient to ensure safety or comfort for the full program day.
d. Weather conditions that may be a cause for closure for ONB programs are dependent on local climate and shelters available to the program. These conditions can include extreme temperatures, high winds, poor air quality, and severe storms. Safety protocols for specific weather conditions are described in more detail below.
e. Weather can affect the presence, behavior, or number of dangerous animals, toxic plants, or disease-carrying insects, and programs should have protocols for how to respond. (For example, wildfires can push wild animals into more urban areas.)
f. ONB programs must include the impacts of humidity (heat index) and wind (wind chill) when creating policies for supporting children's health in various temperatures. See "Heat" and "Cold" below for more information.
    i. Increasingly, organizations have been using a measure called the WetBulb Global Temperature (WBGT) to incorporate multiple factors at once (air temperature, humidity, wind speed, the angle of the sun, and cloud cover). NOAA suggests that this measure is useful when intending strenuous physical activity in direct sun.[33]
g. Programs should have clear policies regarding weather-related program adjustments and closures, and must ensure timely communication with families. These policies should be included in land-use agreements, as well as program and parent handbooks.
h. 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.

[33] "HeatRisk Overview" NOAA, access Sept 28, 2026 https://www.wpc.ncep.noaa.gov/heatrisk/overview.html

15. Clothing

a. Clothing that provides protection from sun, wind, rain, snow, or ice is essential to safety in the outdoors. Types of clothing that ONB programs require or provide include:
    i. Sunhats, lightweight and light-colored clothes with long sleeves to protect against direct sun[34]
    ii. Wool or synthetic layers to retain heat in the cold and wet[35]
    iii. Waterproof outer layers for rain or snow, including boots, pants, jackets, mittens, and hats to keep the skin dry
    iv. Additional dry clothes to be available as needed



University of Delaware Lab School

b. ONB programs partner with caregivers to ensure children arrive ready to be outside with the clothing they need for the weather conditions of the day. However, programs also should have the necessary clothing items available for children who do not have them. Examples of additional items that help support accessibility and inclusion for all children include:
    i. Boots that are wool-lined and are wide and open enough for children wearing ankle and foot orthotics
    ii. Layers that are tagless or with flat seams for sensory-sensitive children
    iii. A waterproof pouch for tablet-based AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices
c. Adding layers of clothing may change the fit of children's outer articles, such as boots. For example, a common mistake is the addition of extra layers of socks, which can cut off circulation rather than provide more warmth.
d. Adding layers of clothing may change the fit of children's mobility-assisting devices, such as wheelchairs, and should be checked to ensure correct fit.

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[34] "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

[35] "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

e. As a necessary expenditure for ONB programs, states should consider how to financially or materially support programs and families to meet the need for appropriate outerwear. States may already have mechanisms for funding through other capacity-expanding capital investments or green schoolyards funding programs.
f. Many ONB programs have gear lending libraries for families, or pass down gear between families as children outgrow clothes.

16. Temperatures - General

a. Temperature has to be attended to in an ONB program. Comfort and safety can be accommodated through appropriate clothing, hydration, access to shade, shelters, campfires or other heat sources, and activity choice.
b. The local climate, the weather that people are acclimated to, the health of staff and children, and the types of shelter available all influence a program's decision to adapt its operations in the event of extreme temperatures, including potential closures.
c. The weather forecast should be checked at least once daily prior to the start of the program, and programs may choose to directly measure their location's temperature for more accurate information.
d. The American Academy of Pediatrics provides many resources[36] on how to manage outdoor play in hot or cold temperatures, as does the National Weather Service.[37] The Natural Start Alliance also provides an early childhood weather guide for a quick reference to support safe decision-making in taking children outside.[38]
e. These practices should be a required component of staff onboarding, training, and emergency preparedness plans for ONB programs.

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[36] "Extreme Heat: Tips to Keep Kids Safe When Temperatures Soar", American Association of Pediatricians, 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 Pediatricians, 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 Pediatricians, 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 Pediatricians, accessed 22 August, 2025, https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Winter-Safety.aspx
[37] "During a Heat Wave", National Weather Service, accessed 22 August, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/heat-during
[38] "Early Childhood Weather Guide", Natural Start Alliance, accessed May 10, 2026, https://naturalstart.org/resources/early-childhood-weather-guide

17. Heat

a. The impact of hot temperatures are exacerbated by humidity, and ONB programs must consider the heat index (or WetBulb Global Temperature if available), 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 children's ages, as young children's ability to tolerate heat by sweating or other measures increases throughout early childhood.

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,[39] and this topic 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. Use sunscreen and lightweight, breathable, sun-protective clothing.
   iii. Use shade, including sun hats or umbrellas, tree cover and canopy, and built shade structures, and be aware of the position of the sun.
   iv. Avoid heat-absorbing surfaces (for example, metal in the sun) and choose lighter-colored surfaces where possible (for example, a lighter concrete instead of blacktop).
   v. Play in/with water and employ 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 (such as public libraries).



Will Smith Zoo School

[39] " 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/extremeheat/warning.html

viii. Adjust daily activities to limit children's vigorous play 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. Use the practices above, and
   ii. Have access to a cooling source, such as structures with shade and misters, fans, and/or air conditioning throughout the day.
   iii. Limit time in the heat by integrating cooling breaks approximately every 30 minutes (or more frequently if needed).
e. **For temperatures above a heat index of 120°F**:
   i. Stay in a cooled shelter and follow any state emergency protocols.

18. Cold

a. The impact of cold temperatures is exacerbated by wind, and ONB programs must consider wind chill,[40] in addition to the temperature, when making decisions about adapting or closing the program.
   i. Getting wet or wearing wet clothes can cool the body, and the ability to stay or become dry is an important consideration for programs 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. [41]
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.
   iv. Use heat sources such as portable heaters, small campfires (see "Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities" for more details on campfires), hand-warmers (not directly touching skin), and serve heated beverages and food.

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[40] "Understanding Wind Chill", NOAA. accessed September 2, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/cold-wind-chill-chart

[41] "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

v. Play in areas more protected from wind, or create shelter from wind using tarps or other materials.
vi. Take field trips to heated buildings (such as public libraries or nature centers), 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. Use 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. Use 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. Use the practices above, and
   ii. Stay in a warmed shelter and follow any state emergency protocols. Some communities may have adequate strategies to be outdoors for short periods of time in -30°F to -40°F.[42]



Secret Forest Playschool

19. 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

[42] "Flourishing in Winter", Dr. Ernst, accessed September 22, 2025, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s_3KB9qCHqYUuQ4I2Cvzt86XTEHlO1tP/view

frequent wind gusts of 30 to 35 mph".[43] When sustained wind speeds are above 25 mph, programs should choose locations with more protection or shelter from winds.

b. Programs should consider the potential impacts of wind, as strong winds (usually above 39 mph) can cause branches to fall or debris to be blown about. The Beaufort Scale describes the likely effects of wind at various speeds on trees and structures.[44] 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. (Programs often hire an arborist to survey an intended program location before bringing children on-site, and regularly thereafter, including after high-wind events.)
c. In areas where high winds may blow dirt, sand, or other fine debris, programs should have eye protection and filtering masks available for children as needed.

20. 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.[45]
b. For an AQI of 101-150, the EPA's Air Quality and Outdoor Activity Guidance for Schools describes appropriate, limited physical activity for children. At an AQI of 151 or above, the recommendation is to move indoors (or cancel activities or programs that can not be moved indoors).[46]
c. Programs may use masks to reduce impacts of poor air quality.
d. The AirNow website (airnow.gov) 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.'[47]
e. Portable air quality sensors are available to measure the air quality in a program's specific location to guide decision-making. The EPA has guidance on the use of these sensors and interpretation of the data.[48]

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[43] "Wind Threat Description", NOAA, accessed Sept. 3, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/mlb/seasonal_wind_threat
[44] "Beaufort Wind Scale", National Weather Service, accessed Sept. 22, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/mfl/beaufort
[45] "Air Quality Index (AQI) Basics", AirNow, accessed Sept. 3, 2025, https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/aqi-basics/
[46] "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
[47] "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
[48] "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



21. Severe Storms

a. Severe storms pose a threat to 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.
    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. ONB programs should bring children to an emergency shelter once dangerous storm conditions are noticed or predicted soon (for example, lightning), or if there is a public alert during program hours.
d. Some severe storms may necessitate evacuating an area or sheltering in place. See “Evacuation” and “Shelter-in-Place/Lockdown.”
e. With enough warning, ONB programs will either close or use an appropriate indoor shelter, offer a partial day, or take a field trip. See “Shelters in Emergency Responses” above.
f. Programs should also follow local guidelines for specific events that may accompany a severe storm, such as lightning, flash flooding, or tornadoes, as these may have different ideal emergency responses.

22. Lightning

a. Programs should immediately access an indoor shelter (for example, 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.[49]
    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.

[49] “Lightning Safety and Outdoor Sports Activities”, NOAA, accessed September 4. 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-sports

ii. Program staff also can count the time between thunder and visible lightning to understand how far away the lighting is: 5 seconds = 1 mile, 30 seconds = 6 miles.[50]

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,[51] including tips for when access to shelter is unavailable,[52] and recommendations specific to wilderness and backcountry settings.[53]

23. Flash 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 on higher ground, and
    ii. multiple routes to the emergency locations may be needed.
d. FEMA provides flood maps that can indicate flood risk,[54] and ready.gov provides additional guidance on evacuation during active flooding.[55]

24. Tornados

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.[56]
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

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[50] "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
[51] "Lightning Safety" NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-safety.
[52] "When a Safe Building or Vehicle is Nearby", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/lightning-outdoors
[53] "Backcountry Lightning Risk Management", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/media/safety/backcountry_lightning.pdf
[54] "FEMA Flood Map Service Center: Search By Address", Federal Emergency Management Agency, https://msc.fema.gov/portal/search
[55] "Floods", Ready U.S. DHS, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.ready.gov/floods
[56] "Understand Tornado Alerts", NOAA, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.weather.gov/safety/tornado-ww

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.[57]

Emergency Planning

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.[58] However, as ONB programs operate primarily outside, there may be multiple potential shelters nearby. Decisions about where to go will depend on what kind of emergency is occurring and how much warning is provided. This includes responding to dangerous weather events, the presence of dangerous animals, threatening human activity, or geological events such as earthquakes. Having site-specific plans, including robust communication practices and specific missing child protocols, will support an ONB program's response to emergencies.

25. Evacuation

a. Evacuation plans for an ONB program should align with local, county, or state guidelines, and the usual state requirements for transporting children in vehicles can apply.
b. Considerations for evacuating an outdoor program include:
    i. The distance from transportation options, such as a van or bus, if those are required
    ii. An understanding of, and ability to safely cross, the terrain surrounding the program's location(s) with all children
    iii. The mobility support needs of children with disabilities
c. Events of minimal warning, such as earthquakes, should be responded to immediately as described in their sections.

26. Shelter-in-Place/Lockdown

a. To shelter-in-place means staying inside a building or other structure to protect from an outside hazard such as weather or environmental contamination.

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

[58]" 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

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

b. Lockdown involves securing a building to prevent unauthorized entry, typically due to a nearby human threat.
    i. Programs must identify at least one suitable building with a locking door and minimal windows within a reasonable distance, such as a park bathroom.
c. For outdoor programs, the decision of whether and where to shelter-in-place or lockdown will depend largely on the type of emergency that is occuring. Decisions of where to go also depend on which shelter is closest and how much warning is provided.
    i. For example, a program may travel a short distance to shelter-in-place at a nearby school during a severe storm, or may lockdown in a park's office building in the unlikely event of a dangerous person in the area.
d. ONB programs must have emergency supplies kept at their emergency locations or in grab-and-go bags, or another suitable location on or near the site.

27. Communications to Prevent or Respond to Hazards

a. Program staff must have a way to communicate with one another, as well as with program leadership and children's caregivers, at any time.
b. Program staff must have a way to call emergency services (such as 911 or poison control) if needed.
c. Handheld two-way radios are useful for staff to communicate with one another and an off-site director if phone services are down, and also are useful during non-emergencies for supervision practices.
    i. Impacts of temperature on cell phones should be mitigated through careful storage, and handheld two-way radios may be used to relay emergency information, as needed.
d. Programs should provide maps and program schedules to caregivers and local partners, including the licensing agency, police, and fire departments.



Premier NW Kids Forest School

i. These maps should show the various locations of the program, if applicable, and the routes to any emergency location(s).
ii. Programs should communicate their intended locations to caregivers, especially if roaming to a new or rarely visited location.
iii. Local emergency services (such as 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 local emergency response teams.

e. Programs should establish regular (at least yearly) reviews of their emergency plans.
f. Programs should access available emergency alert systems at the state and national levels.[59]

28. Missing Children Protocols

a. Programs must have a policy in place to ensure all children are accounted for, checking approximately every 10 minutes and during transitions. Additional proactive practices are described in the "Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities" section.
b. Programs should teach and practice with children to remain in place and call for help if they become separated from their teachers.
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.

29. Dangerous Animals, Plants, and Other Species

a. People live alongside and in interconnected ways with other species in nature. Children can learn valuable lessons from interacting with their local flora and fauna, and also from learning how to respond appropriately if encountering plants or animals that could be dangerous.
b. ONB program staff should be prepared to identify, avoid, or otherwise respond to any dangerous animals or toxic plants in the local ecosystem. Programs should develop an emergency safety plan for encountering wild animals or other species that may pose a danger to children.
i. This information should be included in required training for ONB staff, and in parent handbooks.

[59] "Emergency Alerts", Ready U.S. DHS, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.ready.gov/alerts

ii. A risk-mitigation plan could be developed for situations when encounters with a dangerous animal, plant, or other species are more likely because of a program's location or activities. For example, if a program operates in a forest where poisonous mushrooms have been found, a risk-mitigation plan for encountering mushrooms is appropriate.

c. ONB programs can partner with park managers or local wildlife experts to understand the risks of animals or plants in the ecosystem, and to communicate about wild animals in the area. Programs also may be asked to report sightings or interactions to appropriate officials.



d. Some areas may have wild animals that could require a program to relocate or temporarily close, such as the presence of a wild cat, and this may change seasonally.
e. Other species that pose a risk to children's health and safety may also emerge seasonally or with climate changes, such as the increased presence of cyanobacteria or ticks. ONB programs should remain aware and assess their locations for these emerging environmental hazards.

30. Earthquakes

a. While earthquakes are rare, program staff should have access to local or state alert systems, such as the USGS ShakeAlert.[60]
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.

Outdoor and Nature-Based Curriculum and Activities

Many early childhood education programs use nature and natural elements to enhance the curriculum and promote environmental stewardship. A nature-based early childhood education program takes an immersive approach, putting children's relationship with nature at the heart of the program. Outdoor, nature-based play is likely to include risky play activities that can be beneficial to children's growth and

[60] "Earthquake Hazard Program: Early Warning", USGS, accessed Oct 2, 2026 https://www.usgs.gov/programs/earthquake-hazards/science/early-warning

development, such as climbing natural features or playing at higher speeds. 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 caregivers 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, and their potential impacts
    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, the number of adults present, and staff:child ratios
    iv. Safety equipment for the specific activity or location
    v. Environmental changes, such as how the weather or seasons may change and affect the activity
    vi. Proactive and responsive actions to guide children's safe behavior during a risky play activity
    vii. Parental consent
d. Benefit-risk assessments that are specific to individual children can support the development and implementation of IEPs that include time in nature.
e. See "Benefit-Risk Assessment for Activities at a Proposed Site" for more information on how preliminary benefit-risk assessments can be used for site selection.
f. 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 manufactured materials (such as puzzles, plastic toys, etc.) and more loose parts (open-ended materials that children can use in a variety of ways) on a daily basis than is typically expected in an indoor program. It is common for ONB programs to:
    i. Rely on verbal storytelling at a higher rate than indoor programs,

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, and
iii. Use hand tools appropriate for gardening or wilderness skill activities.



Northeast LA Forest School

b. Programs should ensure children have access to a variety of resources and experiences over time, through the intentional selection and rotation of 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 and 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:
    i. Identifying and responding to children's individual developmental needs
    ii. Learning about and including families' cultural norms and practices
    iii. Strategies for open communication
    iv. Transition plans for newly enrolled children
    v. Behavioral support plans
    vi. Early intervention partnerships
c. ONB programs are strongly encouraged to develop policies that eliminate or severely limit expulsion, suspension, and other exclusionary discipline practices.
    i. Strategies to support inclusion should be documented by program providers to support individual children's outcomes.

ii. Data about expulsions should be collected and analyzed by state agencies to plan or adjust efforts to reduce bias and disproportionate effects on any specific groups of children.

d. Inclusion practices should be collaboratively developed with, and responsive to, children and their caregivers.
e. Transition plans for entering an ONB program, and for transitions throughout the day, should be developmentally appropriate and culturally supportive, with goals and shared strategies for successful inclusion in the program.
f. Programs should establish a curriculum that is responsive to differences in age, ability, developmental needs, and cultural norms and perspectives.
g. Programs should consider concerns about children's behaviors in the holistic context of each child's strengths, skill deficits, or unmet developmental needs. Programs may actively partner with caregivers and families as experts in their child's needs and to support children's strengths-based learning.
h. States should provide or facilitate access to technical assistance to support programs in implementing these inclusion requirements.[61]



Seattle Playgarden

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 can 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 learning opportunities within natural environments. Natural environments may even be a specific and intentional aspect of a child's IEP.
c. Programs should make reasonable accommodations to support the needs of children with disabilities, such as:
    i. Additional staff supervision
    ii. Curricular or schedule adaptations

[61]Child Care Aware (2017) *Building Inclusive Child Care Systems.* Accessed Oct 2, 2026 https://www.childcareaware.org/our-issues/health-nutrition/inclusivechildcare/

iii. Supporting children's hygiene needs
iv. Incorporating adaptive equipment and activities

d. When determining necessary accommodations, programs should prioritize consideration of a child's agency, universal design principles, and the accessibility of pathways and facilities.
e. Staff may need additional training on the provision of accommodations that are culturally responsive and trauma-informed.
f. ONB programs may partner with their local public school so that children can receive access to itinerant, or traveling, special education services on site, to ensure children's ability to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. This is as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
    i. State coordinators for IDEA Part B and Part C may assist programs in understanding how to access funds or services supporting inclusion of disability.
g. Children with disabilities may need specialized support during emergencies, and particularly during evacuation procedures.
    i. These should be clarified in a program's emergency plans.
    ii. 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.
h. 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.

35. Honoring Indigenous Sovereignty and Knowledge

a. Programs that are not Indigenous-led or provided by Native American Tribes should strive to learn about Indigenous history, culture, and sovereignty in the United States, and seek opportunities to build respectful partnerships with Native nations and people wherever appropriate.
b. Programs should avoid curriculum and practices that actively appropriate from or stereotype Indigenous Peoples, or contribute to their erasure from historical and current understandings of human habitation.



Aventuras Forest School

c. Programs should utilize curriculum resources provided by Indigenous Peoples when available.
    i. Examples include resources provided by the National Museum of the American Indian,[62] and the Washington State Since Time Immemorial curriculum.[63]
    ii. Program staff may benefit from training and support in how best to honor Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge, as with other nature-based curriculum foundations, including ways to avoid cultural appropriation.
    iii. States should support early learning programs' access to curriculum materials and training on honoring Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge in accordance with Tribal consultation.

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 ropes, sticks, painted rocks, cones, or other items, including natural features, to support children in recognizing and remembering boundaries.
c. Staff are likely to 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, reviewed often, and reviewed with children as they enroll during the year.

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.
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 for safe climbing.

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[62] "Search NK360° Educational Resources", Smithsonian, accessed Oct. 2, 2026 https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/lessons-resources/search-resources

[63] "John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial Early Learning Curriculum", Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, accessed Oct. 2, 2026 https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/tribal-relations/since-time-immemorial

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 rocks or other debris, 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 for the climber to have three points of contact at all times (for example, two feet and one hand on the climbing surface while one hand reaches).
    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.



SOL Forest School

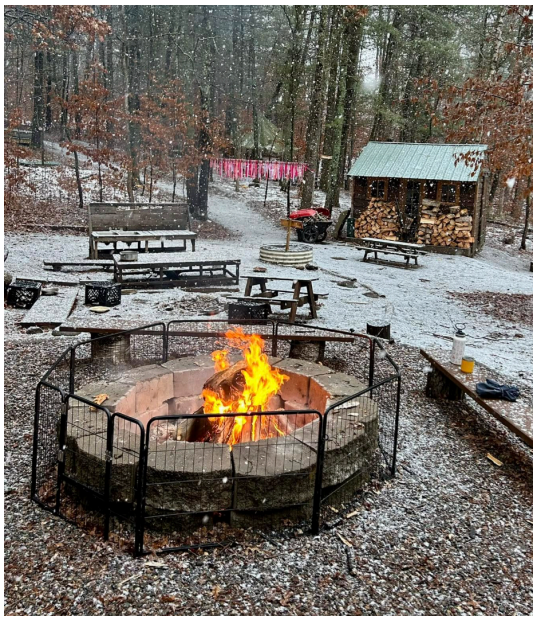
f. Climbing in the outdoors should require a teacher to be within arm's reach of the child's midriff as they climb beyond 30 inches off the ground,[64] effectively acting as a barrier and being able to provide support as needed.
    i. Children should not be allowed to climb beyond where a staff person, 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.

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. Campfire activities should follow all U.S. Forest Service guidelines for fire safety and may only be used in areas without fire restrictions or bans.[65]
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 (such as a string), and by placing seating (chairs or benches) at the appropriate distance.

[64] 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.
[65] "Campfire Safety", Smokey Bear, accessed September 4, 2025, https://smokeybear.com/en/prevention-how-tos/campfire-safety

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 (such as 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. Programs should be aware of potentially dangerous flora and fauna in bodies of water, especially non-moving water such as ponds or lakes, including harmful bacteria or algae overgrowth, insects, or snakes. Programs must take steps to mitigate these potential hazards and risks.
d. 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 the following:
        - 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.

e. 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.

f. 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.

g. 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.[66]
    i. When children are engaged in water activities in a body of water that is more than 24 inches deep, a lifeguard or a program staff member that has water safety training should be present.
    ii. 24 inches is a common depth for designating a residential swimming pool, but this may be different in each state.

[66] "Supervision Near Water", National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, accessed October 3, 2026, https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/cfoc/basic/chapter/2/2.2.0.4

iii. Ratios may need to be adjusted to accommodate the developmental differences, disabilities, or medical conditions of individual children. For example, a 1:1 ratio is needed for children with epilepsy or seizure disorders.

h. 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).[67]
    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 sand that are deeper than children's knee height, nor deeper than two feet, and should be closely supervised.
    iv. Children must have appropriate clothing, including footwear, for swimming or water activities, along with dry clothing to change into.

40. Foraging

a. Foraging and sustainable harvesting can provide opportunities for learning about the natural world, our interdependence with the local ecosystem, and environmentally responsible practices.
b. Program staff who will forage with children must be able to demonstrate they can do the following:
    i. Properly identify the different edible 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.
c. Programs should reference trusted sources for information regarding the best practices, hazards, and risks of foraging, and local native peoples may offer sustainable harvesting guidelines.
d. Programs must have policies in place to ensure children do not touch or consume any toxic plants, fruits, mushrooms, or other toxic matter.
e. 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.
f. 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

[67] "Supervision Near Water", National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, accessed October 3, 2026, https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/cfoc/basic/chapter/2/2.2.0.4

other fungi have the potential to be very dangerous, even fatal. Therefore ONB programs must not allow children to touch, harvest, or consume wild mushrooms unless directly supervised by qualified mushroom foragers or mycologists, even if a teacher or child thinks they can correctly identify the mushroom.

41. Gardening and Farming

a. Gardening and farming activities can provide a variety of benefits for an ONB curriculum, including helping programs reflect or honor their cultural context.
b. Programs that provide food from gardening or other agricultural experiences for children must check for pests or contamination from animal waste and follow applicable food handling requirements, such as for the washing of vegetables and fruits or for the collection and consumption of eggs.
c. Programs should reference trusted sources for information regarding the best practices, hazards, and risks of farming or gardening activities. Most states have an extension school that provides locally relevant resources for gardening and agriculture.[68]
d. Programs should designate a space for eating that is sufficiently separate from any farm animals to prevent contamination.

42. Hand Tools

a. The use of developmentally appropriate hand tools provides many benefits to children's learning, including promoting hand-eye coordination, grip strength, spatial awareness, and self-esteem or empowerment. Hand tools are not power tools, nor are they toys. Hand tools can include mallets, hammers, screwdrivers, kitchen tools, peelers, and even small knives or saws.
b. Programs must have benefit-risk assessments and procedures for using hand tools, including increased supervision requirements and staff competencies.
c. Use of hand tools may be limited to 1-2 children at a time with active supervision of a staff person.
d. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) provides guidance for the appropriate personal



Nature Ninos Prescott

[68] "Find Extension in Your State", Extension Foundation, accessed May 11, 2026, https://extension.org/find-cooperative-extension-in-your-state/

protective equipment (PPE) for adults[69]. PPE can include items such as goggles or gloves. PPE for children should be as thorough as that recommended for adults, if not more, and child-sized.

e. 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.
f. Staff should evaluate children's developmental levels, capabilities, and readiness when considering the appropriateness and safety of particular tools.
g. Hand tools should be stored away and inaccessible to children when not under direct supervision.

43. Playing at Higher Speeds

a. ONB programs, like other early learning programs, may provide opportunities for children to engage in play at higher speeds, for example, 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. Separate areas should be designated for going up or down a 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 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 for any activity at higher speeds.
f. Sleds should not contain sharp edges.



Kristen Hammer, Nature Together

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,

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

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.

44. 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 child care 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.



45. Pre-Service Training Additions for ONB Program Staff

a. ONB staff may need additional training in topics such as 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 of ONB program staff.

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.[70]

46. In-Service Training Additions for ONB Programs

a. ONB programs must train their staff, upon hire and at least annually, on the following:
   i. The hazards and risks of their outdoor locations and any benefit-risk assessments and safety plans
   ii. The program's risky play and program activity policies and teaching practices, such as those relating to foraging, campfires, and water play
   iii. The program's policies and procedures regarding weather and program adaptations, emergency response plans, and communicating with families
b. ONB programs should review with staff all risky play policies and procedures at least once each season, where risk mitigation plans may change with the weather or seasonal changes to the environment, such as an increase in water level.

47. Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play

a. Staff must actively supervise children at all times and should visually account for all children regularly, approximately every 10 minutes and during transitions.
b. There should be at least two staff with children at all times. Program staff should have handheld two-way radios 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.
e. Some risky play activities may require focused supervision, limitations to the activity, or additional staff. For example:

[70] "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

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

48. 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 and Caregiver Engagement

As in all early learning and child care programs, families and caregivers play an essential role 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. Many families will rely on ONB program staff to teach them essential outdoor safety practices, and families also can benefit from participating in outdoor activities.

49. 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.

50. 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. Caregivers should be informed of the appropriate clothing for the various kinds of weather, including layers for warmth, sun protection, and waterproof options as needed. Programs

may encourage caregivers to pack extra clothing in case of weather changes.

b. Programs should regularly inform caregivers about the expected weather conditions and recommended clothing, such as through daily texts, newsletters, emails, or a dedicated section on the program's website.
c. 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.

51. Communicating with Families About Program Locations

a. Families and caregivers should be informed of all the locations that may be used by the ONB program for play and emergency shelter, including any variations in sites or roaming nature-based settings.
b. 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, and could include highlighting regular site assessments, risk mitigation strategies, and emergency protocols in place at each site.
c. Families and caregivers should have a way to locate the group at any time. Programs should establish regular communication channels to keep families informed of any changes to location or program logistics.
d. Programs should offer information about transportation logistics, including drop-off and pick-up locations and procedures, including accessibility considerations.
e. Programs that offer transportation for children should follow any existing, applicable regulations, which must include processes for ensuring the vehicle and driver are in good condition or standing, and the proper use of car seats or other safety devices appropriate for the age and size of the children.

52. Child Records

a. Programs should store or carry essential child information, such as emergency contact, medical or health care plans, and medication directions and authorizations to any outdoor, nature-based location where the child is at all times.
b. Laminating or putting pages into plastic sleeves can help protect child records from water or other wear and tear, which may be especially common if carried in a backpack. A grease or wax pencil can be used to make daily notes in wet weather. Any information that needs to be stored long-term (such as medication administration records) should be transferred to the correct record storage area after the program day.

Conclusion

The Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor, Nature-Based Early Learning and Child Care Programs represents the combined effort of many experienced and passionate educators, researchers, state agency representatives, and advocates for nature-based education.

As outdoor and nature-based learning expands across the United States and internationally, sharing knowledge of best practice and aligning resources across borders creates a strength of community. *The Recommendations* is a resource that is intended to support the collaboration of state agency representatives, educators, community leaders, and advocates as they adapt these recommendations to fit their local contexts and ecosystems.

Fundamental to these recommendations for ONB licensing is a distinction between hazard and risk and the importance of supporting risky play outdoors in natural environments. Life contains risk, and these recommendations describe a system that actively supports children's sense of agency and resilience as they navigate risks in order to learn, grow, and find joy in their life experiences.

We make these recommendations because the benefits are clear: Spending time outside with nature in a safe and exploratory way is good for everyone, especially children. All children deserve to play outside. All children deserve to have a connection with their environment. Yet, not all children have access to these beneficial experiences due to historical and current inequities, and barriers within our state child care licensing systems. *The Recommendations for Licensing Outdoor Nature-Based Early Learning and Child Care Programs* helps expand access to the benefits of nature by describing how our early learning systems can bring children outside safely and at scale.

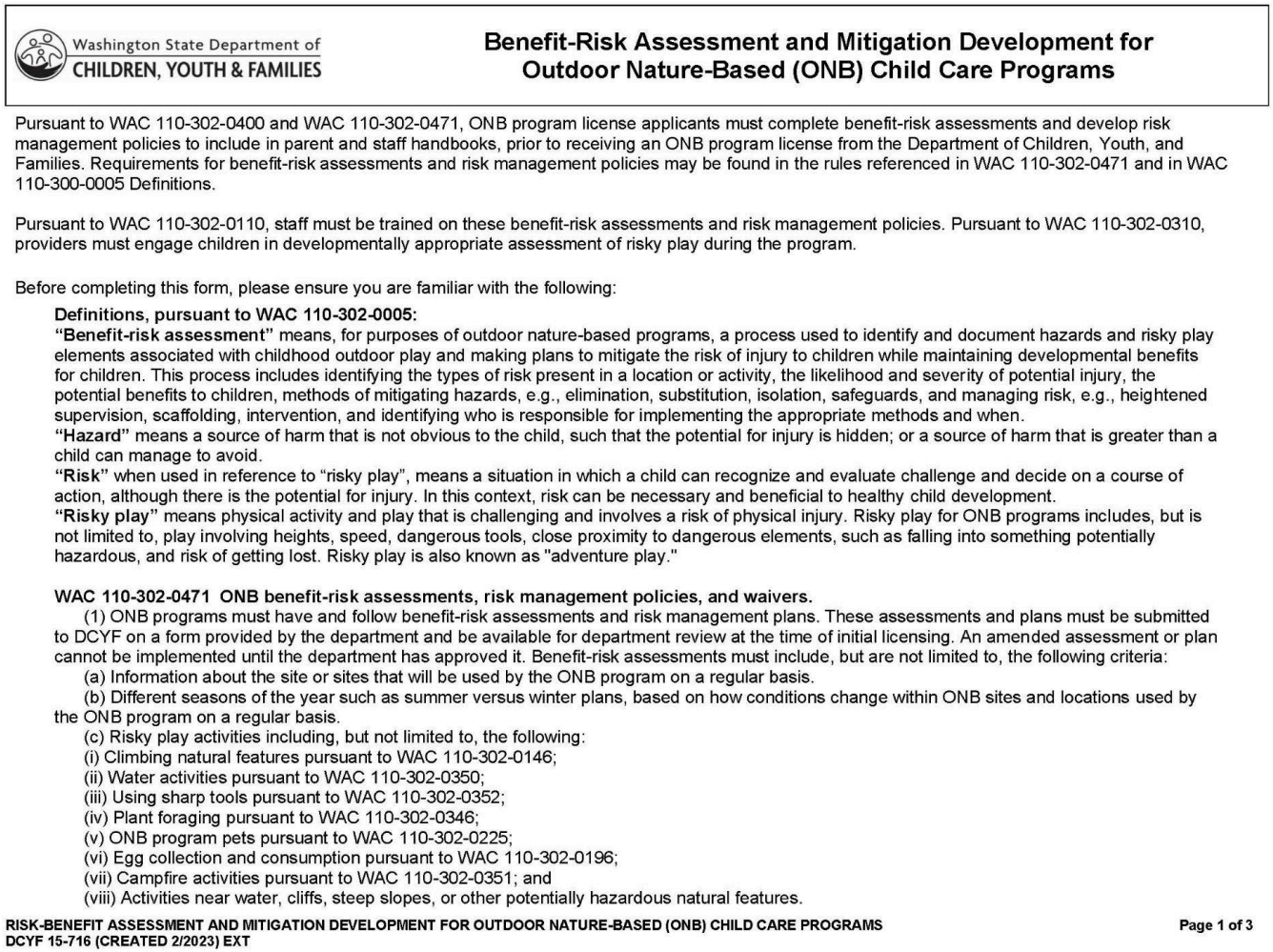
May these recommendations be a source of inspiration and encouragement to bring children and nature together in all early childhood settings.



Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education

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.[71] 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

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 **Page 1 of 3**
DCYF 15-716 (CREATED 2/2023) EXT

[71] "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 <u>each</u> 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 to do support the benefits and address the hazard and risks of an activity or location. Include any need for additional staff or staff training.**
EXAMPLE: Tree Climbing	*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.*	*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*	*EXAMPLE: 0146; 0345; and 0110*	*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.*