



Pisces
Foundation

GEORGE B.
STORER
FOUNDATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH + MESSAGING / FINAL REPORT
29 OCTOBER 2021

table of contents

01

Overview
Methodology

02

The Current State

03

What We Heard
Values, Vocabulary, Messages

04

Recommendations

05

The New Messaging

06

Appendix

OVERVIEW

Getting from here to there

From July through October 2021, the George B. Storer Foundation, in partnership with the Pisces Foundation, consulted with Seven November, Inc. on a comprehensive messaging analysis initiative. The work comes at a critical moment, when outdoor learning opportunities for very young children are gaining awareness and investment in many communities. However, *to date, there has not been a comprehensive messaging approach from the environmental education field* to engage the support of broader early learning funders.

This study was designed to understand the early learning funding communities' priorities, values, and vocabulary to inform resonate messaging that brings more partners into advancing the work of outdoor learning for the very young. This was *a small study* - only five early childhood funders were interviewed - yet it uncovered new and relevant information for framing a strategic communications approach.

By analyzing the early learning funder community's messaging, understanding of outdoor education, messengers and communications preferences, we are able to *design a path forward to connecting more potential partners to invest in early learning experiences outdoors*. The intention is to provide the Storer and Pisces communities the strategic communications platform for attracting new partnerships, investments and program scale.

“What do we say this work is?

Sometimes we say outdoor learning, sometimes environmental education, sometimes nature-based learning. Is it youngest learners, or just learners?

Sometimes we switch it up, sometimes we are more intentional.”

THE BIG QUESTIONS

What do we seek to understand?

- 01 How are we talking about early learning outdoors, today?
- 02 What are early childhood education funders prioritizing, and what messaging are they open to hearing?
- 03 How do we bridge the gaps between the field and this new audience, to bring more partners to the work?

METHODOLOGY

Our Methodology included:

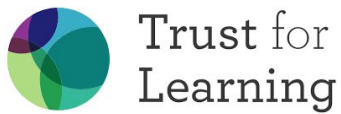
1. An audit and analysis of existing messaging from early childhood providers of environmental education (both funders and Storer grantees). Common vocabulary, values, and calls to action were mapped and gaps were identified.
2. Review and analysis of publicly available messaging from early childhood education funders (not in the outdoor space).
3. One-on-one, thirty-minute interviews with four partners advancing environmental education for young learners, to assess messaging challenges and opportunities.
4. One-on-one, thirty-minute interviews with five national early childhood education funders to test values, messages, vocabulary, and messengers.
5. An online survey component to the interviews to allow for rating and ranking of communication preferences.

Interviews used common question sets and responses were captured without attribution, to encourage candor. Interviews were incentivized. A complete list of funders and grantees whose messaging was analyzed, as well as interview participants, may be found in the Appendix.

Only qualitative research methods were used in this study.

WHO WE ASSESSED

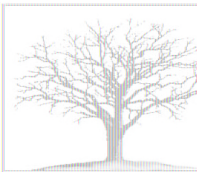
*Storer Foundation + Grantees
+ others in the work*



naturalstart
alliance



TURNER
FOUNDATION



*Funders and policy advocates in
Early Childhood Education*

Buffett Early
Childhood Fund
investing in the early years



COMMENTARY

“You have to invest in outdoor spaces just as [one would] indoor [spaces], it’s not less expensive. Don’t assume it’s a modest or low-cost investment.”

“The term nature-based, from a policy perspective, raises feasibility issues. Saying outdoor seems accessible and available to all.”

“I am looking forward to changing this narrative [that time outdoors is not critical for young children].”

“I totally believe in the power of outdoor play and I see the systemic barriers to sustaining it.”

“There needs to be a shift in the perception of what early childhood education is and what young children need at those ages. People connect it to educational settings, and it’s hard to sell that while they are playing, they learn.”

“I’ve never known the difference between child care and preschool in my career. We perpetuate these ideas that aren’t based in reality.”

“Our advocates are not well-versed in funding and policies around facilities as much as child development and quality early learning.”

“Children need to be outside for physical, emotional, mental health, and we need safe spaces for all children. This is just naturally part of the definition of quality.”

“When you find an audience with a rich understanding of how children learn, there is an obvious connection [to outdoor learning]. It’s immersive, sensory. When [people are] not as knowledgeable about the science of how children learn best, it feels like something that isn’t as critical.”

“Funders...acknowledge [the need], but there is so much wrong going on there is no extra space to focus on something that feels ancillary.”

“It’s important to center children who don’t have daily access to safe spaces in all of the messaging.”

The Current State

THE CURRENT STATE

Messaging from the field

We began with a review of the messaging that *Storer grantees* and partners have been using to *identify common language and themes*.

WHAT STORER GRANTEES AND PARTNERS ARE SAYING:

- Environmental literacy, and the importance of early nature-based education for building conservation awareness
- Health benefits (physical, mental, developmental) of time spent in nature
- Access and equity, racial and socioeconomic justice

We then widened the net to see how *traditional early childhood education funders* are messaging and discovered *gaps in the conversation*.

WHAT THE BROADER ECE COMMUNITY IS MISSING:

- Emphasis on the need for supporting providers and teachers of early learners, but limited discussion of the demographics of the labor force (mostly Black and Brown women), the poverty wages providers receive, and the equity gaps that result.
- No consensus on the definition of high-quality nature-based early childhood education
- A misperception that new facilities/infrastructure are needed for high-quality early learning outdoors

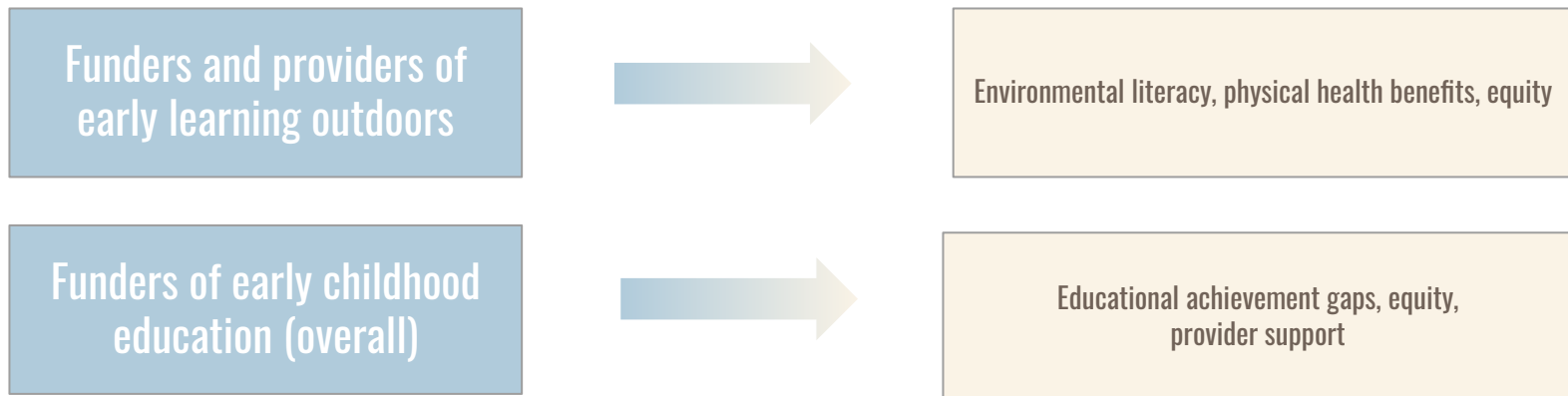
THE CURRENT STATE

Messaging from the field

Notably, the Storer Foundation's focus on "happy/healthy/creative and curious kids" and creating "a sense of place" are unique (and more imaginative) amongst those we studied. Other funders aren't using storytelling or vivid narrative to make nature-based early childhood education come alive for their stakeholders.

There is a *shared realization* across funders of systemic issues that contribute to poor quality early childhood education, which could serve as a unifying message.

Through this analysis, we identified gaps and an important overlap between what providers are talking about and what funders are prioritizing:



What We Heard

WHAT WE HEARD

Know the audience, part one / the reality of child care today

The child care and preschool field, today, is highly challenged. Communities are pushing for more (at times, universal) access, parents and lawmakers are demanding “quality,” the workforce is under-compensated, leading to high turnover and staffing shortages. New federal dollars are flowing to the sector, but there are *competing priorities* lining up for those investments.

If outdoor learning for ages 0-5 is seen as additive or expensive, it becomes easy to reject, even among funders who see the benefits. *Messaging that wraps outdoor learning into the child’s everyday experiences, at a low cost, will be critical* for adoption.

“Outdoor learning or nature-based preschool is [so far] removed from the day-to-day reality of our network. There are so many other immediate needs...the workforce, family’s economic situations, mental health, training teachers to implement regular curriculum, etc.”

WHAT WE HEARD

Know the audience, part two / how children learn

Among the early learning community, those who understand the science of how very young children learn are those most likely to lean into outdoor learning as a component of a quality learning environment. People who *know the importance of play-based learning*, sensory experiences, and safe, consistent connections to caregivers quickly grasp the benefits of outdoor learning. They accept, and in some cases expect, outdoor learning as part of the description of “quality early learning.”

However, *not every audience is well-versed in child development*, particularly policymakers. In these cases, wrapping language about how children learn and where they may learn most effectively will be important to the success of the final messaging. Absent that, it is easy for them to frame outdoor learning as ancillary, additive, and potentially expensive.

“When you find an audience with a rich understanding of how children learn, there is an obvious connection [to outdoor learning]. It’s immersive, sensory. When people are interested in early childhood education, but not as knowledgeable about the science of how children learn best, it feels like something that isn’t as critical.”

“There needs to be a shift in the perception of what early childhood education is and what young children need at those ages. It’s hard to sell that while they are playing, they learn.”

WHAT WE HEARD

Know the audience, part three / where they are

Audiences will have *different impressions of and experiences with outdoor learning depending upon where they live*. Perceptions of early learning outdoors vary between urban and rural audiences, among those who live in colder or warmer climates, and in red or blue states.

For example, one funder expressed how their state's licensing guidelines for child care centers prohibit teachers from taking children outdoors when the heat index is above or chill temperatures are below certain markers. For that reason, they found *some of the messages tested to be highly compelling, but not credible*. And it called into question the financial aspects of outdoor learning - would it make sense to invest in that space if it would go unused some of the time?

A messaging strategy that offers *flexibility for audience variances* across the country will be important going forward.

“If you say ‘nature-based preschool’ in Nebraska, people may think, ‘oh you’re one of those liberals out there.’”

WHAT WE HEARD

A more equitable world, inside and out

Messages framed around diversity, equity, and inclusion rated highest among external stakeholders, on both the credible and compelling scales. Because early childhood funders are well aware of inequities in education, presenting *outdoor learning as a means of bridging opportunity gaps* is highly resonant. If, by creating more access (to outdoor learning) we bring more young children into better early learning and can then shrink opportunity gaps, we'll have an engaged audience for those messages.

One interviewee expressed that the DEI messages did not resonate with them, because they interpreted this approach as advocating for better education for some (but not all) children. With outdoor learning only reaching a small segment of early learners today, they felt it should be available to all and not just those with less access today. It is only one perspective, but helpful to keep in mind in context of the other feedback.

“The [messages] that resonated the most are the ones that highlighted outdoor learning or play as a medium for addressing inequities.”

“A few [messages] spoke to equity and they were compelling and credible.”

WHAT WE HEARD

The quality conundrum

The national conversation around early childhood education today consistently uses the term “quality.” It is generally accepted that, as we work to expand early learning to more children, it must be of high quality. For practitioners of early learning outdoors, it is natural to want to expand the definition of quality early learning to include an outdoor component. And for many early learning funders, that works. Particularly among those who understand how young children learn, *incorporating outdoor learning into the conversation “just makes sense.”*

From a messaging perspective, attaching outdoor experiences to the definition of quality early learning is challenging in two ways. First, *there isn’t (yet) a universal understanding of how to define high-quality early learning*. As one stakeholder says, “The definition has been alluding our country forever; it doesn’t mean anything super specific.” Second, items that are seen as additive to what is already required of early learning, just to meet the definition of quality, may be perceived as costly and not practical. Especially given the low wages and high turnover of child care professionals, adding additional costs may be a nonstarter.

Any messaging of early learning outdoors as part of quality learning will need to be nuanced, respectful of financial implications, and tailored for audiences with varying levels of understanding of child development.

“You want early childhood to do all these things, but the business model prevents us from paying providers well. We put all these demands on it from a quality perspective that we don’t actually pay for. It’s hard to sustain.”

WHAT WE HEARD

Return on investment

Several of the messages tested stakeholders' affinity for embracing a new educational approach (outdoor learning) if it were low cost/high value, and offered a positive financial return.

These messages proved to be more compelling than credible, indicating that *the idea is appealing, but would need backup to prove* it is possible. Funders questioned the ability to create safe, sustainable natural play areas without significant financial investment, particularly in urban areas. If we can demonstrate (with data) how modest investments in outdoor learning can meet children where they are and accelerate learning, we will likely find positive engagement.

We also learned opening a conversation about financial returns can quickly lead to *assumptions that the money will be used to create physical spaces* or infrastructure. This can be problematic, as one interviewee put it, "A lot of funders don't want to fund physical spaces, they believe it's someone else's role. That's a really hard sell." Another offered that the partners in their network were not well-versed around facilities and navigating state budgets, codes, and zoning in order to create better learning spaces. "The people in our network just don't have the capacity." A solution may be to *message investing in what happens in the space (learning, growth, etc) rather than in the physical space* itself.

"Messages that reference financial investment, those rated compelling, but it depends on the context and format - is it completely unstructured? Isn't infrastructure needed to support outdoor learning?"

"One of our funders is advocating for an emphasis on access to nature, but the challenge is when you place something like that in 'quality,' it can disparage programs that don't have the resources to do the imaginative work to activate spaces. It can't always be done on a dime."

WHAT WE HEARD

One way, not the only way

Stakeholders expressed concern with messages that communicate outdoor learning should be a mandatory part of quality early childhood education. Professionals immersed in the early childhood world have seen many different pedagogical approaches, and believe there are multiple ways to define quality learning. What works for one student or one preschool may not work for another.

Softening our messages to *frame outdoor learning as one approach - not the only approach* - will likely lead to more connection and engagement.

“[Try] highlighting outdoor learning experiences as one of several ways to implement high-quality early childhood education. Not as a must, because different types of experiences work for different types of children and families.”

Show and tell

Evocative messages and stories that describe young children engaged in outdoor learning are highly resonant, as the *concepts can be difficult for some to understand*. If we are promoting use of natural materials over man made structures, being very specific about what those materials are and how children learn by playing with them becomes important. Don't assume audiences know what we mean by nature-based or outdoor learning.

“Generally I’m drawn to concise statements, but the vividness of the one with the kinds of activities [“imagine”] was compelling.”

WHAT WE HEARD

Caregiver aware

Early childhood funders see the *caregiver crisis facing child care and preschools*, and many are making investments to shore up this essential workforce. The Biden Administration has also made commitments to invest in early childhood care providers and educators through the American Families Plan, calling attention to the nation's child care crisis.

Of course, conversations about integrating outdoor learning into children's days will bring up questions about the caregiver impact and the practicality of adding in additional training, curricula, and evaluations.

To demonstrate appreciation for the complexities of early learning delivery, we need to *include the caregiver perspective in messaging*. Communicating benefits to the caregivers, including physical and mental health benefits of time spent outdoors, can be a bridge to connection with these funders.

Respect for caregivers and teachers was reinforced in another way in this study, with participants rating *caregivers and their stories as the most influential messengers* for early outdoor learning.

*“Half of child care workers qualify for child care subsidies. We pay poverty wages.
Change will only last as long as the adults in the classroom are supported.”*

VALUE ALIGNMENT

To inform strategic messaging, we first look to find values we hold in common with our target audiences. Starting with the most resonant values from the Rethink Outside study, we tested eight value statements with external stakeholders.

Each was asked to consider *the importance of each value in terms of their organizational priorities*, and then rate the values on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest possible score.

Seven of the eight values tested extremely well (rating between 9-10 each), which shows we are positively aligned with the core values of the early learning community. One value rated *a perfect ten among all stakeholders*: pointing us to a messaging strategy that presents early learning in the outdoors as a tool for narrowing educational opportunity gaps for all.

The lowest testing value (aggregate score = 4.2) is “advancing environmental literacy and care for our natural resources.” This is not surprising, given our focus on audiences outside of the environmental sector, and underscores why current *messages around environmental literacy may be creating more distance than connection*.

Organizational Value	Weighted Average (1-10 scale)
Narrowing gaps and addressing disparities in education, making high-quality educational experiences and outcomes available to all	10
Improving children’s physical health and health outcomes	9.8
Improving children’s mental health and well-being	9.8
Increasing children’s educational outcomes and successes	9.8
Creating a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse society	9.6
Strengthening families	9.6
Strengthening communities	9
Advancing environmental literacy and care for our natural resources	4.2

VOCABULARY

Using the most common vocabulary shared by partners investing in outdoor experiences for young children, we tested specific words and phrases with the external stakeholders. Participants were asked to share top of mind reactions to the concepts and to talk about what these words meant to them.

Nature-Based Preschool

A place where the outdoors is intentionally used for formal learning, taking advantage of natural materials. A preschool where the majority (or all) of learning happens outside, with natural play areas such as tree trunks, leaves and water. Nature-based preschool is seen as elevating play-based learning. But the phrase raises questions of access, and may be seen as elite.

Outdoor Learning Experiences

Connotes informal learning or “anything that happens outside the context of a formal learning environment.” More vague than nature-based preschool. Seen as offering learning outdoors using natural materials.

Outdoor Classrooms

Suggests an indoor/outdoor bifurcation. An outdoor area where some activities can happen. Seen as outside of formal learning, but more structured than purely informal learning.

Learning Outside

Taking children from a classroom into the outdoors for playing or walking. Taking a chalkboard, whiteboard or books outside for lessons - a continuation of indoor learning. Engenders feelings of going outside for fun, health and engagement with the environment. A ‘sometimes’ activity, not where the majority of learning happens.

Outdoor Learning Environment

Feels more flexible than ‘nature-based preschool,’ and could be formal or informal learning spaces. Seen as a “less elevated” learning environment than in a classroom or home.

MESSAGING

Using the shared values as a starting point, and folding in vocabulary and concepts that have been successfully used by partners, we created eight messages for external testing. Stakeholders were asked to rate each statement on a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest) for being *compelling* (meaning evocative, interesting) and *credible* (meaning believable, true).

Across the board, *messages rated higher on the compelling than on the credible scales*. This may indicate that while a message may resonate, it will require proof or validation before being accepted. Words denoting there is only one way to accomplish a goal - for example, “must” - were particularly polarizing and may be pulling down the credibility ratings of otherwise compelling messages.

The messages that rated highest for both compelling and credible speak to the quality of education, access for all learners, and the physical and mental health benefits that result from positive early learning experiences.

“We need to craft messages so people understand all the things we’ve tried.”

Outdoor learning is one way we know children learn well.”

<i>Messages Tested</i>	<i>Compelling</i>			<i>Credible</i>	
	Weighted Average	9 or 10		Weighted Average	9 or 10
Statements rated on a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest) for being <i>compelling</i> (meaning evocative, interesting) and <i>credible</i> (meaning believable, true).					
Expanding access to quality early childhood education must include daily access to high-quality outdoor learning spaces - a proven way to help students be healthier, happier, and more focused.	9.2	4		7.4	1
All young learners deserve regular, positive outdoor learning experiences, regardless of where they live, their race, or their socio-economic background.	8.6	3		8.4	2
Positive outdoor learning experiences in infancy and early childhood set the foundation for better personal physical and mental health, and the opportunity to live in healthier communities.	8.4	2		8.2	2
Activating very young children's outdoor spaces for exploration and learning is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that delivers substantial educational, health, and wellbeing benefits.	8.4	2		7.8	1
For early childhood education to be high quality, it must include regular opportunities to play and learn outdoors.	8.4	2		6.6	0
When young children, regardless of their backgrounds or resources, have opportunities to participate in high-quality learning experiences outdoors, we address educational disparities and improve their long-term educational outcomes with modest financial investment.	8	2		7	1
Our littlest learners deserve the benefits that come from daily, high-quality outdoor learning experiences, especially those from communities of color, English Language Learners, refugee children, children with disabilities, and low-income families. By providing outdoor learning to those who experience the greatest educational, health and nature gaps, we begin to address historic injustices and inequities, and create stronger communities for all.	7.4	2		6.4	1
Imagine a space where very young children safely experience the benefits of nature every day. Instead of traditional plastic and concrete playgrounds, kids get dirty in a mud kitchen, explore a pollinator garden, climb on logs or boulders, and engage in immersive, sensory, unstructured outdoor play. With new emphasis on early learning, and federal investments becoming available, we can make outdoor learning an essential part of high-quality early childhood education for all young children.	7	3		6.4	0
When we program outdoor learning experiences into every young child's day, we meet kids where they are (daycare), we take advantage of underutilized resources (outdoor spaces), we offer respite and engagement for our caregivers, and, most importantly, the children receive the many benefits of time spent in nature. We deliver a rich set of learning experiences that research tells us very young children are naturally primed for, with limited financial investment.	6.8	2		7	2
The best classroom for very young children may not be a classroom at all. An activated, high-quality outdoor space for playing, exploring and learning can bring the benefits of time spent in nature to every child, and it can be right outside the doors of their child care or preschools.	6.8	2		6.4	0

MESSENGERS

When asked which people would be the most influential messengers to speak to the benefits of outdoor learning for very young learners, a clear preference emerged for those closest to the work: teachers and parents.

A middle-ranking tier of messengers shows promise for academics, directors, and former students to be deployed in some areas of influence.

<i>Messengers</i>	<i>Average Ranking (1-8 scale)</i>
An early childhood educator/teacher/child care provider.	7.6
The parent or guardian of a young child experiencing outdoor learning.	6.4
An academic or scientist studying the effects of outdoor learning on young children.	5
The executive director of a nonprofit organization connecting young learners to the outdoors.	4.4
An adult who benefited from high-quality outdoor learning at a very young age.	4.2
A nature-based preschool administrator/executive director.	3.8
A policymaker who has advanced policy changes to benefit young learners.	2.4
A funder/philanthropist investing in early childhood outdoor learning.	2.2

MESSAGE SUPPORTS

Interview participants were shown a list of supporting information someone may receive when they are learning about the benefits of outdoor education for very young learners.

They rated each using a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 means that the item would be “very influential” if they were to see it in the context of information on outdoor learning, and 1 means “not at all influential.”

All types of supporting information tested well, with a *preference for stories from teachers* augmented by data supporting the benefits of learning outdoors.

More than one participant noted *articles in the mainstream press* - not education or environmental media - with evidence of the return on investment of this learning approach would be particularly compelling.

<i>Message Supports</i>	<i>Weighted Average (1-10 scale)</i>
Stories from child care providers / teachers.	8.8
Academic or scientific data supporting the long-term benefits of time learning outdoors to very young children.	8.8
Stories from families of young children.	8.4
Economic data demonstrating the return on investment of resources directed toward early learning outdoors.	8
Articles in the mainstream media [example: New York Times, NPR, or Education Week] showcasing successful early learning outdoor programs.	7.8
Stories from young adults who participated in early learning outdoors during ages 0-5.	7

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

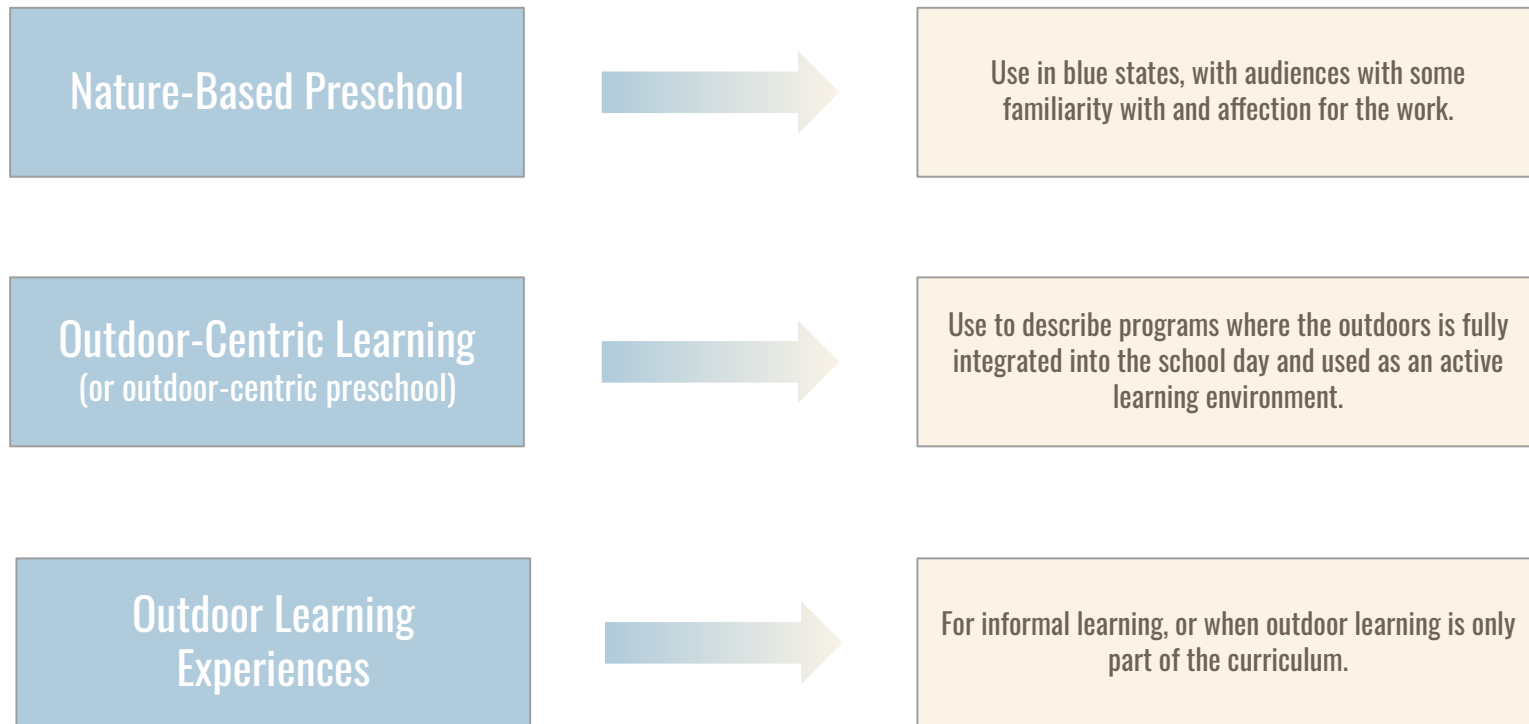
Connection through shared values, compelling messaging

Connect with new audiences through their *top-ranked organizational values and using their preferred vocabulary* and messaging.

1. Frame messaging as offering a proven, low-cost option for narrowing opportunity gaps in education. Secondly, highlight the mental and physical health benefits of outdoor learning. Lean into education and health, lean away from environmental literacy and conservation.
2. Be descriptive and paint vivid pictures of what early outdoor learning looks like. Stay away from language that communicates building big/new/expensive facilities or taking children away from centers or schools to get into nature. Use evocative language: for example, mud kitchens, water play, gathering leaves, balancing on tree trunks.
3. Bolster messages focused on cost benefits with data and examples, to increase their credibility and acceptance. Commission (or find) research quantifying the benefits of outdoor learning at very young ages. Share data via public announcements with academic or scientific partners, infuse into all messaging and content.
4. Keep messages as succinct, jargon-free and non-hyperbolic as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Refine the language we use to describe the outdoor experiences we seek.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Narrative and storytelling

Intentionally craft and share stories of change.

1. Elevate stories of caregivers in traditional (environmental education) and nontraditional (K-12 education) media, events and social media. Highlight the importance and challenge of their work, and the benefits they see from outdoor learning. Represent geographic and urban/rural diversity in the programs and teachers highlighted.
2. Offer messaging training, ghostwriting, speaker coaching and social media amplification for grantees to get stories out about their communities' experiences with very young children and outdoor learning. Look to place their perspectives on panels and news reaching the formal K-12 community, including national education conferences, webinars and media outlets.
3. Inject perspectives on outdoor learning into national conversations - via earned media and speaking engagements - around what quality child care looks like today. Frame the benefits, and relatively low cost, of outdoor learning experiences as one way - not the only way - to create quality settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Demonstrate thought leadership with new partners, audiences

Elevate the most resonant voices to bring new awareness and supporters to the mission.

1. Place commentary and stories in business or economic media outlets about the low-cost/high-impact nature of early learning outdoors. Use solid data and offer recommendations for scalable, sustainable programs. Contextualize the often underutilized resource of the outdoor spaces, where caregivers can meet kids where they are (not taking them somewhere else.)
2. Commission and publish thought pieces on the whole picture of child care today, acknowledging the systemic issues and offering outdoor learning as one option for improvement. Use examples that show overcoming perceived barriers to implementation, for example, have washing machines onsite so kids can go home with clean clothes. Encourage caregivers and parents of young children to author the thought pieces.
3. Deploy the messengers with the highest influence: the teachers. Create a “master educators” forum for early learning professionals embracing outdoor learning. Offer professional development, tested curricula and publishing opportunities. Elevate the educators voices through earned and social media, speaking engagements and peer mentoring.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A new home on the web: zerotofiveinthewild.org

Create an online environment (website), educator voiced, where curious administrators, policy makers and funders can easily understand the benefits of outdoor learning and see themselves in solutions. Demonstrate what outdoor learning for very young children means by offering context, data, stories and very tangible examples. Become a hub of knowledge and engagement for grantees, partners and media.

1. Prioritize front-page content (and SEO) that showcases the *features we know early learning funders value*.

Visuals, Images, Videos

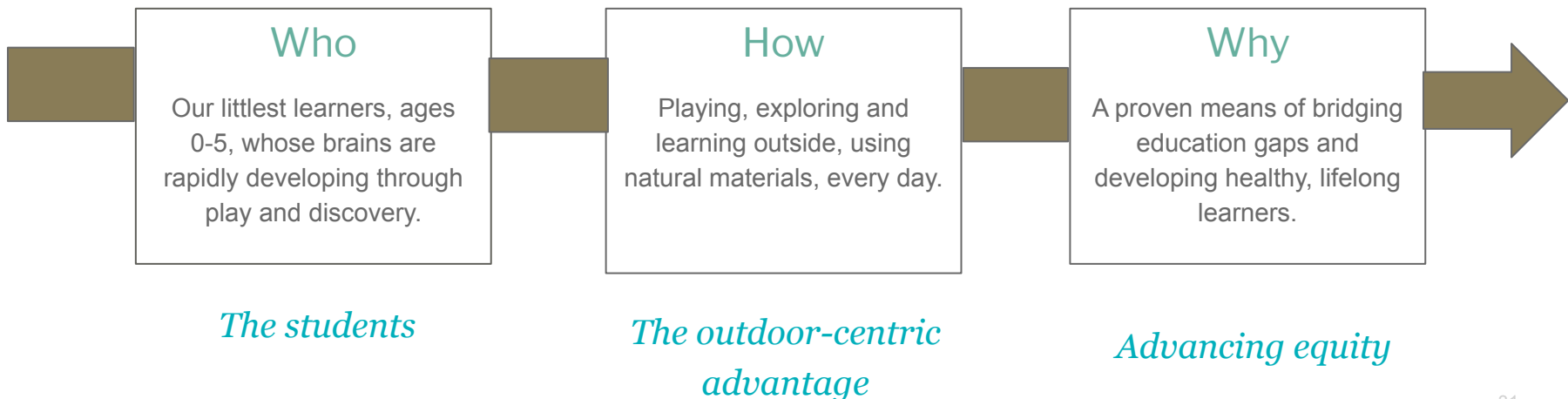
Caregiver stories

Research + data

Equity benefits

ROI

2. *The student journey*: clearly show who outdoor-centric early learning is for, the benefits, and how it can be scaled. A great visual or infographic here could be an effective and unexpected way to draw in visitors.



RECOMMENDATIONS

A new home on the web, cont.

3. Add a *Featured Faculty* section to the homepage, rotating between different caregivers (from the “master educators” initiative, if implemented). Offer them the space to share stories, writings or observations. Encourage them to share on their social channels. Employ active SEO to draw in audiences searching for experts in early childhood education in the outdoors.
4. Add an *Alumni Spotlight* to the homepage to showcase where graduates land after age five and how they are progressing through their K-12 years. Profile a diverse range of genders, ages and racial backgrounds. Encourage the schools the featured alumni currently attend to share their spotlights on their schools social channels #0to5inthewild
5. *Bring people virtually to outdoor-centric learning* through visually strong homepage videos featuring students learning outdoors, short interviews with caregivers, families and (when possible) students. Share videos on social channels #0to5inthewild.
6. Feature the *diversity* of the students served by outdoor-centric learning - people from all different backgrounds, genders and geographies - in the homepage imagery.
7. Employ active *Search Engine Optimization (SEO)* on the homepage with an emphasis on key messaging. Track, measure and adjust on a regular basis.

Messaging

FINAL MESSAGING

Values-based, tested

1. Expanding access to quality early childhood education, including daily experiences in high-quality outdoor learning spaces, is a proven way to help students be healthier, happier, and more focused.
2. All young learners deserve regular, positive outdoor learning experiences, regardless of where they live, their race, or their socio-economic background.
3. Positive outdoor learning experiences in infancy and early childhood set the foundation for better personal physical and mental health, and the opportunity to live in healthier communities.
4. Activating very young children's outdoor spaces for exploration and learning is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that delivers substantial educational, health, and wellbeing benefits.
5. The quality of early childhood education improves when it includes regular opportunities to play and learn outdoors.
6. When young children, regardless of their backgrounds or resources, have opportunities to participate in high-quality outdoor-centric preschool, we address educational disparities and improve their long-term educational outcomes with modest financial investment.

Appendix

Comparative Messaging / Funders of Outdoor Learning for 0-5



COMPARATIVE MESSAGING

CLIENT George B. Storer Foundation
DATE July 2021

Funders currently investing in outdoor learning for 0-5

	ORGANIZATION	POTENTIAL CONTACT FOR INTERVIEW				KEY MESSAGES				
			Website	Social	Programatic Descriptions	Health (physical and/or mental)	Advancing equity	Improved educational outcomes	Advances environmental stewardship	Benefits of time spent in nature
2	Storer Foundation		https://storerfoundation.org/	N/A	Connect hundreds of nature preschools and forest kindergartens and we fund several graduate and undergraduate teacher education programs for preschool teachers that include nature-based learning, and we are supporting organizations that advocate for high quality outdoor learning environments at childcare centers to ensure that every child has regular experiences in nature.	The Foundation believes in developing healthy, happy, creative and curious children. We believe achieving this goal requires the integration of into the fabric of early childhood education.	Environmental education can greatly improve the quality of education and can contribute to a more equitable education system.		The existential threats we face - like climate change - require an environmentally literate citizenry that recognizes the importance of healthy ecosystems and is motivated to protect them.	Every child deserves the opportunity to connect with nature, and forging that connection is good for them as well as the future of the planet.
3	Trust for Learning	Chrisanne Gayl, Chief Strategy and Policy Officer	trustforlearning.org	@trustforlearning	Trust for Learning is a philanthropic partnership dedicated to expanding ideal early learning environments for underserved children. (To equitably expand ideal learning programs for children 0-8)					Outdoor learning is important whenever possible, allowing children space to run, jump, and engage in big body play.
	JPB Foundation		https://www.jpbfoundation.org/	@TheJPBFdn	We focus on enabling healthy and resilient communities by funding initiatives that address energy, environmental health, green infrastructure and field strengthening.					
	Turner Foundation		http://www.turnerfoundation.org/	@TurnerFdnInc	Environmental Education - The Foundation funds innovative environmental education programs that promote environmental literacy (K-12) and systemic change in our schools.		Limited - example: "Public lands may be open to all, but thanks to the cost of gear and difficulty of access, not everyone has the same opportunity to use them."			

Comparative Messaging / Storer Grantees

Grantee	Need Statement	MESSAGING							ROI	Cost, access to quality child care
		Health (physical and/or mental)	Advancing equity	Improved educational outcomes	Advances environmental stewardship	Benefits of time spent in nature				
National Wildlife Federation (ECHO)	When young children spend time playing outdoors, particularly in natural settings, they benefit in a variety of ways: obesity reduction; improved cognitive development; social/emotional well-being; reduced 'nature deficit disorder' . Research is clear that the earlier kids spend regular time outdoors, the greater the benefits.									
Tiny Trees	As our cities expand, our children are leading lives increasingly divorced from the natural world . Children are frequently denied access to the compounding benefits of time outdoors, including reduced obesity and improved cognitive and social-emotional development . COVID-19 has only increased this divide, as structured outdoor time for children has drastically reduced with remote learning, and closed school and afterschool programs. Lack of safe, healthy green spaces and an increasingly screen-oriented society / Rising housing and childcare costs push quality early childhood education out of financial reach for many.	We strive to create safe and affirming outdoor spaces that support children's physical, emotional and intellectual development.	Implements an anti-bias curriculum							
Urban Ecology Center	lack of exposure to nature, outdoor time and physical activity during childhood has adverse effects on development, health, environmentally sound behavior, and retention of science concepts.									
	the social environment for many children of color includes personal and family experiences of racial discrimination that foster perceptions of powerlessness, inequality, and injustice									
	The pandemic has made the value of outdoor learning clear, a new administration is emphasizing the critical role of early childhood education, there is increased appreciation for racial inequity and injustice in our society and urgency to address it, and new policy avenues are opening to allow for more and better outdoor experiences in early care and education.									
NAAEE/ Natural Start Alliance	the sector continues to require national coordination, resource development, networking, research, policy guidance, media representation, leadership in support of access and equity									
Natural Learning Initiative	promoting the importance of the natural environment in the daily experience of all children, through environmental design, action research, education, and dissemination of information. We aim to help communities create stimulating places for play, outdoor learning, and environmental education – places that recognize human dependence on the natural world. We collaborate with educators, play leaders, environmental educators, designers, planners, politicians, and all professionals working for and with children. Childhood obesity, diabetes, anxiety and depression, sensory integration issues, and poor coordination and motor abilities have become common. The pandemic exacerbated these problems for many children, especially those engaged in online learning or experiencing family hardship.									
	many teachers and child-care providers lack experience in this realm and are unable to facilitate nature play and learning with confidence . They require solid training and follow-up support to provide outdoor experiences that are rewarding and safe. Teachers who have been working with scripted programs in an era of "accountability" may also need help to trust that children can learn through exploration, play, and first-hand experience. Professional development provided by knowledgeable experts is essential. It needs to relate to a range of school and childcare settings and be affordable.									
Antioch Nature-Based Early Childhood	No Clear Pathway to Licensure for Outdoor Preschools Nationally									
	No Unified Voice for Advocacy from Outdoor Preschool Providers									
Willamette Partnership	Outdoor Preschools Don't Have Access to All Universal Preschool Resources									
	In the United States, 17% of children are obese and 16% are overweight . Obesity early in life is a risk factor for morbid obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease mortality in adulthood. According to the Harvard School of Public Health: "Daycare is the new frontier for obesity prevention."									
Washington State University	improve mental health, motor development, vitamin D levels (supporting bone health), and social and emotional development									
	the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism , inspiring curiosity, engagement and leadership in learners of all ages gains new importance. embrace a place-based approach while navigating these pandemics and the other challenges they face.									
	without education that is inspiring courageous citizenship in the next generation , students will be unprepared for the future of work in a reimagined WY economy. Students will become increasingly disconnected from people and nature . Students - as future leaders and voters - need to have a systems lens to recognize the ecological, cultural and economic aspects of the problems our communities face		Transformative place-based education can only be achieved through a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).		Stewardship as a core value					
Teton Science Schools										

Comparative Messaging / Early Childhood Education Funders (without outdoors)

CLIENT George B. Stoner Foundation
DATE July 2021

Funders currently investing in early childhood education, but not outdoor learning for 0-5

ORGANIZATION	POTENTIAL CONTACT FOR INTERVIEW	Website Social		Programmatic Descriptions	KEY MESSAGES						Approach	Grantees + Main Focus
					Health (physical and/or mental)	Advancing equity	Improved educational outcomes	Advances environmental stewardship	Benefits of time spent in nature	ROI		
1	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	https://www.rwjf.org/	@RWJF	<p>1) Providing healthy, nurturing surroundings for children in their earliest years can help establish the building blocks for lifelong health.</p> <p>2) We work to ensure that all families—no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they make—have the resources they need to foster healthy development from their child's earliest years.</p> <p>3) There are zero states in the United States able to provide child care assistance to the majority of families who need it.</p> <p>4) Federal funding for early childhood education and care promotes three overarching policy goals: (1) increasing children's access to services; (2) raising the quality of early childhood programs; and (3) fostering greater coordination among the many providers—public schools, center-based child care, home-based child care, Head Start, and more—of early childhood services.</p>							health systems, communities, children and families (mostly child development and advocacy re: labor market, less about outdoor options/integration)	https://www.rwjf.org/en/how-we-work/grant-explorer.html#1319
2	Doris Duke Charitable Trust	https://www.ddcf.org/	@DorisDukeFdn	<p>1) One of the Child Well-being Program's core strategies is to support coordinated, resident-informed, neighborhood-level efforts that aim to make measurable improvements in the health and well-being of children and families.</p> <p>2) Delivery of these programs must be culturally, geographically and locally relevant. The Child Well-being Program therefore supports organizations that have deep roots in their communities, are trusted by residents, and partner with multiple sectors (e.g., health, education, criminal justice and housing agencies) to coordinate services for children and families at the neighborhood level</p> <p>3) Invest in improving the local physical environment (e.g., clean and safe housing, community gardens, safe places to socialize and play), like the outdoors?</p>		Many children in the U.S. experience a long legacy of unjust historic and systemic inequities and disparities that rob them of access to the fundamental factors that allow others to flourish.					promote children's healthy development and protect them from abuse and neglect	Mount Sinai Hospital, National Center for Youth Law, Think of Us, National Black Child Development Institute
3	Foundations for a Better Oregon (formerly Chalkboard Project)	https://www.betteroregon.org/	@forabetterOR	We envision a better Oregon that hears, values, and cares for every child . Communities, policymakers, system leaders, and philanthropy forge networks of trust, honor Oregon's complexity and move as one to remedy the historical and emerging injustices facing children . Public systems authentically engage families and communities in design and decision-making to uphold our collective commitment to children. Together, Oregonians nurture children's learning, aspirations, and humanity, and every child knows that they belong .							demystifying complex systems and elevating community-driven solutions to disrupt the historical and emerging injustices facing Oregon children and families	
4	Bezos Family Foundation	https://www.bezosfamilyfoundation.org/		A child's future is profoundly influenced by how they learn and develop in their earliest years. Our programs and grants help create joyful, enriching experiences that lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning, and provide adults with the knowledge and skills they need to give children the best possible start							Through a diverse portfolio focused primarily in the United States, we seek to make thoughtful investments in people and programs ready to take their work to the next level by helping organizations grow and expand their reach. We aim in our grants to provide support where there is the most need, whether that means an underdeveloped strand of research, science, or art.	Access Montessori, Ascend at the Aspen Institute,
5	Imaginable Futures	https://www.imaginablefutures.com/doc-us/infites-learners/		What if, at this early, critical time in a learner's lifespan, we could nurture them to learn in safe, loving and playful environments? And, what if we could support parents on strategies that might best support their children? What if we could provide appropriate recognition and professional development opportunities for our early childhood educators? More broadly, what if early childhood education was a right of birth for each and every child?								
6	Pritzker Children's Initiative	https://pritzkerchildrensinitiative.org/		Building a promising future for our country through investments in early childhood development			goal: that all at-risk infants and toddlers in the United States will have access to high-quality early childhood development resources, increasing their likelihood of success in school and life			Economists also tell us that the best investment our country can make is human capital in high quality early learning. High quality programs provide the best benefits to both the child and society, elevating poverty and resulting in more economically stable, higher education rates, better health, and a stronger ability to lead and create environments.		

Storer Foundation Partner Interview Participants

Brian Kurzel, Regional Executive Director / National Wildlife Federation

Christy Merrick, Sr. Projects Advisor / NAAEE / Natural Start Alliance

Ellen Roche, Executive Director / Trust for Learning

Cara Sklar, Deputy Director, Early and Elementary Education Policy / New America

Partner Interviews

question set

1. How do you describe your organization's work with early learners?
2. What messages have you found to be most effective with donors and potential partners?
3. Have you had success engaging non-traditional partners? How?
4. Who have you seen doing a good job with talking about the work? What do you like about their approach?
5. Is there anything else you suggest we keep in mind as we move ahead with our messaging work? Are there other people in the field you suggest we speak with?

Early Childhood Education Funders

Interview Participants

Gladys Haynes, Director, Nebraska Early Learning Initiatives / Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Mabel Munoz, Sr. Program Officer, Early Childhood Development / Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Enyi Okebugwu, VC, Impact Investor / Imaginable Futures

Nara Topp, Program Officer / W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Albert Wat, Sr. Policy Director / Alliance for Early Success

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / values

On this screen, you will see a list of value statements. Please read through them, and rate each using a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 means “very important” and 1 means “not at all important” to your organization’s mission.

[Answers were randomized]

1. Strengthening communities.
2. Strengthening families.
3. Improving children’s physical health and health outcomes.
4. Improving children’s mental health and well-being.
5. Increasing children’s educational outcomes and successes.
6. Narrowing gaps and addressing disparities in education, making high-quality educational experiences and outcomes available to all.
7. Creating a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse society.
8. Advancing environmental literacy and care for our natural resources.

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

open-ended/ vocabulary

I am going to read a few phrases to you, and I'd love to hear your top-of-mind reactions to them. Please tell me what they mean to you, any positives or negatives you associate with them, or whatever comes to mind.

[Answers were randomized]

1. Nature-based preschool.
2. Outdoor learning experiences.
3. Learning outside.
4. Outdoor classrooms.
5. Outdoor learning environments

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / messages

On the following screens, you will see a series of statements. I'd like you to rate each, using a scale of 1-10, on how compelling and credible you feel each statement to be. A rating of 10 would mean you find the statement to be "highly compelling" (meaning evocative, interesting to you) or "highly credible," (meaning believable, true) and a rating of 1 would mean you find the statement to be "not at all compelling" or "not at all credible." It's okay to assign different ratings to the same statement.

[Answers were randomized]

1. When young children, regardless of their backgrounds or resources, have opportunities to participate in high-quality learning experiences outdoors, we can address educational disparities and improve their long-term educational outcomes with modest financial investment.
2. Expanding access to quality early childhood education must include daily access to high-quality outdoor learning spaces - a proven way to help students be healthier, happier, and more focused.
3. Positive outdoor learning experiences in infancy and early childhood set the foundation for better personal physical and mental health, and the opportunity to live in healthier communities.
4. All young learners deserve regular, positive outdoor learning experiences, regardless of where they live, their race, or their socio-economic background.

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / messages

5. Imagine a space where very young children safely experience the benefits of nature every day. Instead of traditional plastic and concrete playgrounds, kids get dirty in a mud kitchen, explore a pollinator garden, climb on logs or boulders, and engage in immersive, sensory, unstructured outdoor play. With new emphasis on early learning, and federal investments becoming available, we can make outdoor learning an essential part of high-quality early childhood education for all young children.
6. Activating very young children's outdoor spaces for exploration and learning is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that delivers substantial educational, health, and wellbeing benefits.
7. Our littlest learners deserve the benefits that come from daily, high-quality outdoor learning experiences, especially those from communities of color, English Language Learners, refugee children, children with disabilities, and low-income families. By providing outdoor learning to those who experience the greatest educational, health and nature gaps, we begin to address historic injustices and inequities, and create stronger communities for all.
8. The best classroom for very young children may not be a classroom at all. An activated, high-quality outdoor space for playing, exploring and learning can bring the benefits of time spent in nature to every child, and it can be right outside the doors of their child care or preschools.

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / messages

9. For early childhood education to be high quality, it must include regular opportunities to play and learn outdoors.
10. When we program outdoor learning experiences into every young child's day, we meet kids where they are (daycare), we take advantage of underutilized resources (outdoor spaces) we offer respite and engagement for our caregivers and, most importantly, the children receive the many benefits of time spent in nature. We deliver a rich set of learning experiences that research tells us very young children are naturally primed for, with limited financial investment.

Is there a particular statement that stood out to you? Perhaps it generated (one of) the highest or (lowest) score(s) from you. Can you tell me more about why that statement did (or did not) resonate?

[Select and repeat the participant's top-rated statement] Would your ratings of _____ change if we replaced the words "outdoor learning experiences" with "nature-based preschool?" How about "learning outside?" Why or why not?

Is there any other feedback you would like to offer on these statements?

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / messengers

On the following screen, you will see a list of people - we often call them messengers - who you might see or hear talking about the value of outdoor education in early childhood. By dragging and dropping these messengers, please arrange the list to show which of them you would find most compelling to speak to the issue, and which of them would be the least compelling. Please place the most compelling messenger at the top of the list and then arrange them in descending order, with the least compelling at the bottom.

[Answers were randomized]

1. An early childhood educator/teacher/child care provider.
2. A nature-based preschool administrator or executive director.
3. The parent or guardian of a young child experiencing outdoor learning.
4. An academic or scientist studying the effects of outdoor learning on young children.
5. A policymaker who has advanced policy changes to benefit young learners.
6. A funder/philanthropist investing in early childhood outdoor learning.
7. The executive director of a nonprofit organization connecting young learners to the outdoors.
8. A young adult who benefited from high-quality outdoor learning at a very young age.

Early Childhood Funders Interviews

online survey / message supports

On the next screen, you will see a list of supporting information someone may receive when they are learning about the benefits of outdoor education for very young learners. I'd like you to please read through them, and rate them using a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 means that item would be "very influential" to you if you were to see it in the context of information on outdoor learning, and 1 means "not at all influential."

[Answers were randomized]

1. Stories from child care providers / early learning teachers.
2. Stories from families of young children.
3. Stories from young adults who participated in early learning outdoors during ages 0-5.
4. Academic or scientific data supporting the long-term benefits of time learning outdoors to very young children.
5. Economic data demonstrating the return on investment of resources directed toward early learning outdoors.
6. Articles in the mainstream media [examples: New York Times, NPR, or Education Week] showcasing successful early learning outdoor programs.

That concludes all of my questions. Did you have any other comments or observations based on what we've discussed?
[open-ended responses]

7 november inc.

hello@sevennovember.com

Twitter [@SevenNovember](https://twitter.com/SevenNovember)

SevenNovember.com