

Sandboxes—Mobile infants, toddlers, and twos have a wonderful time playing with sand outdoors, where you do not have to worry about a mess. You can purchase or make a sandbox or use a large tractor tire. Make sure you have a way of covering the sand to protect it from animals.

Water tubs—A table, trough, or tubs to hold water will delight children on hot days. Make sure that whatever you use can be emptied easily after each use. A hose, by itself or with a sprinkler, is another way to provide water play outdoors.

Tires—Automobile tires, embedded in the ground, become structures for mobile infants, toddlers, and twos. Children can climb into and out of them and sit for a while. Drill holes in the tires so that water cannot collect and become a breeding site for mosquitoes.

Playhouses, boats, and tunnels—You can purchase playhouses or construct them with the help of families. An old rowboat, sanded and painted, would be a great addition to the playground. Tunnels made from expandable wire covered with cloth can be stored easily when not in use.

Cardboard cartons—While not permanent structures, the cartons from computers and household appliances can be transformed into tunnels, playhouses, cars, or places for children to be alone for a while. Cut large windows and doors so that adults can see children at all times.

Selecting Materials and Experiences for Different Ages

The way young children use outdoor equipment and materials differs according to their temperaments, developmental levels, and previous experiences.

Young Infants

You need to be very near young infants, so one of the first considerations is to arrange places where you will be comfortable sitting with babies and where you can observe everything that is happening. To put infants down, you need a protected area where they can be safe from children who walk and run. In providing materials and experiences for young infants, think about what they will be doing outdoors.

Watching—If young infants are carried or placed where they can see what is happening outdoors, you have a natural playground for them. Babies can safely observe their surroundings from an infant carrier, stroller, infant swing, or infant seat. When they are comfortable, infants are eager to watch such things as blowing leaves, other children, and you. You can enhance the environment by hanging colorful scarves and other fabrics from trees or structures where they will be blown by the wind. Hanging crystals or colored pieces of Plexiglas® from a fence or tree branch will create interesting light patterns.

Listening—Outdoors, the noise of traffic, the chirping of crickets and birds, and the shouts of children at play will interest young infants. You can also place wind chimes outdoors where infants can hear them when the wind blows or when you gently strike them.

Reaching and grasping—Place some toys on a blanket for infants to grasp and explore. For ideas, see chapter 11, *Playing With Toys*.

Moving and doing—Once infants can roll over and sit up, they need a flat, soft surface on which to move safely. They also need you to stay nearby.

Interacting—You are probably the most interesting part of the outdoor environment for young infants, just as you are interesting to them indoors. They will coo and respond as you talk about what is happening, sing to them, and draw their attention to interesting sights.

Mobile Infants

In addition to opportunities for sensory exploration, places for motor exploration are important for mobile infants. They crawl, pull up, cruise while holding onto structures or your hand, and soon walk. They still need a protected area where they will not be bumped by toddlers and twos who are moving quickly. Once mobile infants can walk on their own, run, and climb, they will want more freedom than an enclosed area allows, and your supervision will be critical to keeping them safe. To provide mobile infants with experiences they will enjoy, consider the kinds of activities that keep them busy and engaged.

Moving and exploring—Mobile infants need large enclosed spaces and places where they can climb, roll, slide, and swing safely. The structures described earlier will give them lots of appropriate challenges.

Pushing and pulling—Children who are just learning to walk enjoy sturdy toys that they can push and that help them keep their balance. Toy shopping carts and baby carriages are popular choices. Once they gain greater stability, they enjoy push-and-pull toys like toy lawn mowers and wagons.

Rolling and throwing—As discussed in chapter 11, *Playing With Toys*, balls are probably the best toys for mobile infants. Outdoors, you can add the challenge of large balls like beach balls, soccer balls, and basketballs. Tightly sewn bean bags to throw into a basket are another option.

Chapter 18: Going Outdoors

Collecting, dumping, and filling—This is a favorite activity of mobile infants, and it is easy to provide the materials they need. Small pails and buckets with handles are perfect for collecting small objects, including toys that you bring outdoors and natural materials like leaves, pinecones, and rocks. A lot of dumping and filling can take place in the sand area if you include small plastic shovels, rakes, scoops, small watering cans, plastic cups, and funnels. Remove any small items that could be choking hazards.

Playing with water—This is an especially nice way for mobile infants to cool off on a hot day. They can walk through a sprinkler, play with water from a hose, or play with water in a trough or dish pans. Add some plastic cups and a few scoops for an added challenge.

In addition to these common activities for mobile infants, you can set up special activities, such as blowing and chasing bubbles, painting with water and large brushes, or finger painting with shaving cream on a smooth surface.

Toddlers

In addition to the materials and experiences you plan for mobile infants, toddlers will enjoy the following additions.

More room for active play—Toddlers are on the move, and they want to use their large-muscle skills. They need plenty of open spaces to run, structures to climb on and jump from, opportunities to slide and build, and surfaces on which to ride wheeled toys.

Riding toys—A smooth surface with pathways is an ideal place for toddlers to use trucks and other riding toys that they can push with their feet.

More things to push and pull—Add wagons and wheelbarrows that toddlers can fill with objects and move. They may also like pushing dolls or stuffed animals in a doll carriage.

Construction materials—Another favorite activity of toddlers is building, knocking down, and building again. Large plastic blocks are a great addition for outdoor play, as are empty boxes and planks that they can walk along. If you have bales of hay, tires, and driftwood, toddlers will use these materials as part of their building projects.

Twos

Twos can really take advantage of their time outdoors when offered a number of choices. In addition to the experiences described for infants and toddlers, twos are ready for more complex and structured outdoor experiences.

Gardening—Twos can help you plant and care for a variety of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. It is best to start with plants rather than seeds, which take too long to sprout for even the most patient 2-year-old. They can help water the garden, check the plants each day for changes, help with the harvest, and enjoy the results.

Recommended Plants⁵¹

- Plants that attract butterflies: butterfly bushes, asters, dill, parsley, hollyhocks
- Plants that provide color, texture, scent and taste: lamb's ears, sage, mint, marigold, basil
- Fruits and vegetables that are easy to grow: cherry tomatoes, yellow pear tomatoes, peas, string beans, melons, carrots, broccoli

Observing animal life—Twos are fascinated by living things. Notice their excitement when they see birds, ants, squirrels, caterpillars, and worms. You can attract birds by putting feeders in the yard. Bug boxes enable twos to collect and study caterpillars or worms that they may be reluctant to hold. You can provide a magnifying glass for closer examinations. Be sure to set all creatures free before returning to the room.

Art materials—On occasion, bring out large colored chalk, brushes and paint, and playdough. The colors look even brighter outdoors, so the art experience is different.

Neighborhood walks—Think of areas in your community where children can visit. For example, the children would enjoy playing in a neighborhood park, taking a trip to the corner market, or walking down the street to a large tree to collect and run through the falling leaves.

Riding toys—In addition to the riding toys that toddlers use, older twos may be ready for small tricycles and vehicles that they can pedal. Be sure to provide helmets.

Ball games—Twos can run to a ball and kick it with increasing control. Always include some balls for them in the outdoor area. You can enhance their ball play by providing baskets to throw balls into and by playing catch and kickball with them.

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