

Early Foundations: Music and Movement in the Outdoor Classroom

by Pamela VanGilder, Anne Wike, and Sean Murphy

In one corner of the Music and Movement Area of a well-equipped outdoor classroom, Imani improvises a tune on a natural wood marimba. "Listen," she calls to a friend. "Come hear my song!"

In another corner, Cody and Bobby jump and twist on a low wooden stage, enjoying the sounds that their shoes make when they connect with the hard wood. "It sounds like thunder," Cody says. "Let's call this our 'Thunder Dance.'"

Under a nearby tree, Shana and Jose wave colorful scarves, mimicking the movements of the tree's leaves as they sway in the wind.

Experiences like these are what make outdoor classrooms a natural way for children to develop foundational movement and music skills that will aid them in all areas of development. Because an outdoor classroom can usually offer more space for large-motor movements than an indoor classroom, children are able to freely experiment with multiple locomotor and non-locomotor activities. And, because sounds are absorbed in the outdoors in a way that's impossible inside, children can create their own music without disturbing other children.

A place for self-expression

Perhaps one of the most positive benefits of an outdoor music and movement area for children is that it provides a place for improvisation. Many parents and educators of young children feel it is very important that their toddler or preschooler has early exposure to dance and music through formal lessons. While many young children respond positively to a well-designed music/dance program, it is just as important that these young children experiment with movement and music making of their own choosing. Children gain

intrinsic confidence, true joy, and valuable skills through self-discovery.

Providing a designated space for improvisation allows children to apply learned skills in a new way, thus giving rise to their creative spark. The outdoors in particular provides a plethora of input to be interpreted by the young improviser. The flight of a bumblebee, the calls of birds, trees swaying gently in a breeze are all examples of input that may be interpreted through movement and music!

Professionalism of the arts in today's society has created a hands-off approach to music and movement. Children and adults are afraid to have fun making music and dancing freely. As an informal performance venue, outdoor music and movement areas encourage active participation by children and adults alike; and promote a low stress environment for experimentation.

A place for developing musical understandings

The outdoors provides a natural place for experimenting with music. Looking at traditional music and dance from cultures around the world, one of the most common observations that can be made is that music and dance takes place outside. The Gamelan Gong of Bali, Samba of Brazil, and Native American Powwows are just a few examples of music and movement groups that perform in the outdoors.

One of the more obvious reasons for these outdoor ensembles is the noise factor. Obviously, teaching 20 children the Samba (using shakers, drums, bells, and whistles) in an indoor classroom is less than ideal. In an outdoor classroom, 20 young sambistas can play without disturbing others. Organized musical activities

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like this foster cooperation, listening skills, and early math concepts such as pattern and repetition.

Outdoor spaces are ideal places for musical improvisation because sound is released into the air instead of bounced around a classroom. A group of children can develop a tune together on the marimba, play the bongos, and quietly manipulate a rainstick all at the same time and without disturbing one another. In the outdoors, the children can experiment as individuals or join together as they choose. Fine motor skills and auditory sensory stimulation of using outdoor musical instruments can occur naturally.

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Sean's story: As an instrument-maker, musician, and teaching artist, I know from personal experience that an easily played and good sounding musical instrument will be used by children (and adults). Instruments should be made of quality materials designed for the outdoors using natural materials wherever possible. For example, I designed and built a huge marimba in collaboration with the staff at Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Nebraska for their Nature Explore Classroom. The 25 foot marimba is made primarily of the nearly indestructible Brazilian hardwood ipe. The sound is resonant and beautiful and we have seen hundreds of children playing the instrument since it was installed over two years ago.

A place for developing body competence

Anne's story: "Go outside and play!" How many of us have been told this and have said this to our own children or students? Some of my earliest memories are being outside by myself or with others exploring the environment by running, wandering, climbing, and observing nature firsthand. As a landscape architect, dancer, teaching artist, and mother, I have the highest regard for exploration of the world through the body. I know these early explorations of movement in the outdoors are the underpinnings of my professional pursuits.

Learning takes place through the senses and what better place to stimulate the senses than the rich environment of the outdoors? It is natural for children to experiment with a variety of movement while interacting with nature and with others.

Imagine several young children running, galloping, and spinning in a large open space. Large movements such as these stimulate the vestibular and proprioceptive systems, helping children gain a sense of gravity and balance as they tumble, slither, and roll in the soft grass. They jump, bounce, and skip forwards, backwards, and sideways on a large wooden platform, laughing and moving between one another while negotiating where their bodies are in space and in relationship to one another. These children are learning what their bodies can do; demonstrating their feelings and ideas through body language; while also maintaining their physical health.

Children will naturally gravitate to what interests them and most often to what they need. We as adults must become aware and honor these needs.

A positive place for all learners

Movement, music, and sensory stimulation are vital in the brain development of all children, but in children with special needs they can open the door to learning and help the brain create important neurological connections that may have been missed during early development. Through our senses we take in information, interpret it, organize it, and respond to our environment. In children with special needs this organization of sensory input is out of sync, causing a variety of different challenges that can involve motor planning, coordination, balance, speech, vision, fear, anxiety, repetitive actions, over-activity, under-activity, and other behaviors.

Pam's story: As a movement specialist in a school for children with disabilities and a mother of a child with Down Syndrome, I have learned that careful observation of a child, his response to his surroundings, and his movement patterns can provide important clues to a child's sensory integration capabilities. When given the opportunity to explore and play in an outdoor classroom, how does the child respond? Does she prefer large, gross motor movements that include spinning, swinging, and running in curved pathways? Or does the child prefer to sit in a quiet, calm area? Is there a repetitive pattern to the child's movement choices? Is one side of the body more dominant than the other? If the child gallops, does he gallop with the same side leading each time? When interacting with the child, are



interpret slow and fast tree growth, old and young trees. Find other examples in nature that could be represented with these words: twist, stretch, bend, rise, fall, shake, wiggle, float, spin, etc.

■ Experiment with locomotor movement

Make animal dances. Invite children to move around the outdoor music and movement area as the animal of their choice. Have them

make the basic shape of the animal and use multiple levels. Encourage children to skip, gallop, leap, crawl, slither, creep, and walk in their animal shape. Have children move in different pathways such as zig-zag, curved, and multiple directions.

■ Experiment with patterns in nature and interpret into music

Help students to identify patterns in nature (the number of trees in the classroom, petals on a flower) and interpret these into musical patterns (clap the number of trees, a musical scale representing the flower petals). The patterns can become more complex (a clap could represent a tree and a stomp could represent a shrub) or take into account anomalies (skip a note in the scale for a missing flower petal).

■ Encourage students to add words to individual songs they create

Help students to create songs about their observations of nature (a squirrel collecting acorns). The melody could be something they know or something they make up. Let students perform for one another.

■ Create group dances with music, using nature as the inspiration.

We facilitated a performance with kindergarteners that sequenced a series of dances the children developed over a semester with their teachers. The children explored nature (animal movements and sounds, tree growth, forces of nature such as ice melting into water with fire, seasonal changes) and developed representational movements. The teaching artists and the children provided music and song. We invite you to use the ideas listed above, to help your students create their own performance.

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you able to help the child gallop with the other side leading? Does the child swing her arms in opposition as she walks or runs? Does the child tend to bump into things or into other children? Does the child look out into the environment or is the focus close and within a small area? Does the child want to touch everything or perhaps put things in her mouth? Or does the child shy away from touching things with different textures?

As I observe, I make note of a child's preferences and patterns, and create movement experiences that will facilitate sensory integration. When introducing a new concept to a child with special needs, I often notice that they observe others several times before deciding to participate. Never underestimate the learning that takes place while a child is observing. Children seek patterns and organization as they try to make sense of the world. Anticipation and knowing what to expect will offer security and develop self-confidence in the child who is allowed to step forward when he is ready. All children, regardless of ability or disability learn to interpret the world as they experience it, and with our guidance they can learn to respond and interact with others and with their environment, especially the natural environment.

Ideas for outdoor music and movement activities

■ Experiment with non-locomotor movement

Make a tree dance. Have children find personal space in which to observe trees. Have them make the basic shapes of the tree trunk, its branches, its leaves. Encourage making shapes with different body parts, with the whole body, and change levels. Children may

The learning that takes place through these activities includes increased observation skills, new vocabulary, math and science concepts, positive social interactions, and increased self-esteem.

A crucial part of a child's development

"Scientists now believe that to achieve the precision of the mature brain, stimulation in the form of movement and sensory experiences during the early developing years is necessary" (Greenough & Black, 1992; Shatz, 1992).

Providing nature-based music and movement experiences on a regular basis can help a child grow stronger in body, mind, and spirit. This kind of natural learning isn't simply "nice" for children to have, but indeed is foundational to their healthy development. And, an added benefit of dancing and making music in the great outdoors is that it's just plain fun for adults and children alike!

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Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Add it now!: Add outdoor movement and music areas to your playground. Start with one addition and then see where there is room for even more places for self-expression.

Analyze this: Identify noisy and disruptive activities that occur in the indoor classroom and systematically plan to move them to the outdoor classroom. Observe the differences in the activities in the two different environments.

Also analyze this: Facilitating sensory integration takes planning a match between interest, skill, and opportunity. Observe to uncover individual differences in movement preferences and patterns and use the observations to create additional experiences with similar patterns or preferences. Then, try some new patterns and experiences to help children integrate new sensory experiences into their skill repertoire.