Outdoor Preschool Equity Toolkit

Oregon Health & Outdoors Initiative

Willamette Partnership
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Thanks to our education partners
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Bend Forest School
Dandy Lions Outdoor Preschool
Fern and Feather Forest School
Fiddleheads Urban Forest Preschool
Freckled Fawn Nature School
Gearhart Kids Academy
Hazelwood Outdoor Kindergarten
Hike it Baby
Kinder Garden Playschool
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Little Gnomes Nature School
Portland Play Project
Recess Outdoor Adventure School
Thimble Forest School
Tiny Trees Preschool
Wild Primrose Preschool
Wildwood Nature School

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As the body of research grows on the benefits of spending time outside, more and more families are choosing to send their children to nature-based and outdoor preschools. Outdoor preschools bring a huge number of positive benefits to kids by encouraging physical activity, reducing childhood stress, and fully engaging children’s senses to the natural world. These programs have measured effects on kids’ physical, social, mental and developmental health, fostering healthy and happy children. Not only are these programs good for kids’ health, they’re good for kids’ academic achievement, as children in outdoor preschools are just as prepared for kindergarten as children in more traditional indoor programs.

Unfortunately, not all families are able to access the benefits that nature-based and outdoor preschool provides. Some families aren’t able to afford the costs associated with tuition or specialized gear. Others need full-day programs or aftercare to fit into their work schedule. And others might not feel safe sending their kids to an outdoor program because they don’t see people like themselves accessing the outdoors.

These barriers shouldn’t get in the way of families being able to access nature-based and outdoor preschools, and so we’ve created this Toolkit to help providers understand the barriers that families in their community might face, then highlight ways they can address those barriers by adopting practices that promote equity.

What is Equity?

As a concept, “equity” means that every person has what they need to achieve their personal best. One of the best ways to understand equity is by contrasting it with a similar word: “equality”. Though related, equity and equality differ in some key ways. Take the example of the bicycles below. Suppose you want everyone in your community to have a bicycle, so you order 100 bikes and hand them out.

An equality-based approach would mean that every person gets the same bike, but it might not help you achieve your goal of getting people to start cycling. Some people are too tall or too short to use the same bike. Other people have mobility disabilities, and so won’t be able to use the bike at all. And some people might already have their own bike, so buying one for them won’t make a difference.

An equity-based approach means that instead of ordering 100 of the same model of bicycle, you ask people what they specifically need to start cycling. This means bikes of all shapes and sizes, and even bikes that are adapted for people who can’t use their legs. Even though not everyone is getting the same bike, everyone is getting what they need to cycle successfully.

In the world of outdoor preschool, equity means that all families have a fair and just opportunity to access nature and outdoor preschools and their benefits. Similar to the bicycle metaphor, this means that some families are going to need extra tools or adapted approaches to overcome different barriers to access, including financial barriers, logistical barriers, and cultural barriers.

Why Is Equity Important?

We envision a future where every child throughout Oregon and the United States has the same opportunity to access the benefits of nature-based and outdoor preschools. Equity is important because it gives families the tools they need to be able to access outdoor preschools and authentically engage in a way that represents their communities and values.

All around Oregon, nature-based and outdoor preschool providers are already expanding their reach to more children and families by intentionally centering equity-based practices at their schools. In fact, out of fifteen nature-based and outdoor preschools we talked to in Oregon, every single one was already taking steps to address the financial, logistical, or cultural barriers that families in their community face to accessing childcare.

We created this toolkit to highlight the incredible work that nature-based and outdoor preschool providers around the state are doing to make their schools more equitable. We encourage you to share this resource with other providers you know, talk to your families about strategies that could work for your school, and share your own successes with us and the outdoor preschool community.
10 WAYS TO PROMOTE EQUITY IN OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL

Overcoming Financial Barriers

Whether a preschool is indoors or outdoors, childcare is expensive. In Oregon, the median cost for a year of preschool was more than $9,000 in 2016.¹ For families with even one child in preschool, this represents a huge burden. For families with multiple children, it can be completely inaccessible.

Though fully outdoor preschools don’t have to pay the cost of building rent and maintenance, most programs put that extra funding toward hiring more teachers per student. That means these programs are often just as expensive as more traditional preschool and childcare programs. Furthermore, outdoor preschools often require specialized gear and clothing (like boots and rainwear) to help kids adjust to the weather year-round. Some families can’t even entertain the idea of outdoor preschool because of the cost.

Ways to Address Financial Barriers:

1. Create a Scholarship Fund or Use Sliding-Scale Pricing Models

Scholarships and sliding-scale pricing models make nature and outdoor preschools more affordable for families who need financial assistance. Scholarship funds can be created by having families who are able to pay full-price pay full-price, then offering scholarships to families who can’t afford that cost. Sliding-scale pricing models mean that instead of having a fixed price per child, schools take a family’s income into account, then offer tailored pricing depending upon what each family can afford.

Kinder Garden Playschool
Milwaukie, Oregon

The Kinder Garden Playschool provides a limited number of scholarships for families who are a good fit and would benefit from the outdoor preschool experience in hopes of bringing equity.

2. Offer Work Trade Programs

Work trade programs make schools more affordable for families and directly involve them with the school. This is when families are able to help out in the classroom (doing things like landscaping, maintenance, managing a school’s website, etc.) in exchange for discounted tuition. Not only does this help more families access the benefits of outdoor preschool, it can also be a huge benefit to the schools who have access to new talents and skills that they would otherwise have to pay for.

Portland Play Project
Portland, Oregon

In addition to scholarships, the Portland Play Project offers partial work trade for families. They prioritize families from communities who have been historically underrepresented in nature-based and outdoor preschool programs, including underprivileged families, families of color, and LGBTQ+ families.

3. Provide a Gear Library

Nature-based and outdoor preschools require specialized gear and clothing to keep children warm and happy. Families need access to appropriate outdoor clothing, and these clothes aren’t cheap! Schools can help offset this cost to families by offering a gear library with spare boots, jumpers, rain jackets, and other pieces of gear that kids need for school but may grow out of in a couple of years.

4. Pursue Licensing and Accept Childcare Subsidies When Possible

While not currently available in Oregon, licensure for fully-outdoor preschools would be an important way to help families who qualify for state and federal childcare subsidies to access nature-based and outdoor preschools. Not only does licensure mean that preschools can accept subsidies, it also means that schools can offer full-day programs, making their preschools accessible to working families who need care for more than just a few hours a day. The following schools are licensed nature-based programs or outdoor preschools that have a licensed indoor classroom.

Curious About Licensure?

While most outdoor preschools in Oregon are currently excluded from licensure, you can join advocates across the country for outdoor preschools licensure so that they can be accessible to more families. Check out our Outdoor Preschool Policy Toolkit to learn about how you can advocate for outdoor preschool licensure in your community!

Pro Tip: Seek Sponsorships to Build Your Gear Library

To get their library up and running, schools can seek sponsorships or discounts from outdoor retailers. Hazelwood Outdoor Kindergarten in Eugene, OR established a sponsorship with Bogs Footwear who provided waterproof boots. Oaki is another example of a retailer that partners with outdoor schools to offer discounts on their outdoor clothing.

Art and Science Kids
Illinois Valley, Oregon

Winter gear is particularly expensive, but also a must-have in places that get regular snow. Instead of requiring each family to buy their gear, Art and Science Kids provide a check-out system for winter clothes to support families who can’t afford the gear.

Gearhart Kids Academy
Gearhart, Oregon

Different regions have access to different childcare subsidies. On the Oregon Coast, Gearhart Kids Academy is qualified to accept the U.S. Coast Guard’s childcare subsidies, which supports the total cost of childcare for Active Duty members.

Wild Primrose Preschool
Milwaukie, Oregon

In Oregon, Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) is the main source of public childcare assistance for working families. Wild Primrose is a nature-based preschool that has licensed indoor and outdoor spaces. Wild Primrose accepts ERDC for working families.

Overcoming Logistical Barriers

Managing a family’s schedule takes a lot of work, and so making it easy for families to access your preschool is important. Logistical barriers like scheduling, out-of-the-way pick-up/drop-off locations, and programmatic obstacles can keep some families from considering nature-based and outdoor preschools. Schools that are far from where families live and work make transportation more challenging, especially if there’s not developed public transportation. Part-day programs don’t work for many families with parents who work and need more than a few hours of care each day. Offering easy-to-access schedules, locations, and programs can help more families access the benefits of outdoor preschool.

Ways to Address Logistical Barriers:

5. Design and Use Accessible Locations

Transportation and physical access can be an obstacle for families, especially when those locations are away from population centers or not easy to find on a map. Some nature-based and outdoor preschools are based out of public spaces like parks and libraries, which are familiar to the public, close to other resources and workplaces, and easy to get to.

Little Gnomes Nature School
Ashland, Oregon

Little Gnomes Nature School provides a forest school at a public park in town, making it easy for families to access for pick-ups and drop-offs. They have a partnership with the Ashland Parks Department.

Fiddleheads Urban Forest School
Portland, Oregon

Fiddleheads Urban Forest School is based out of inner Southeast Portland. Their school is close to a large city park that they walk to and explore every day.

The Dandy Lions Outdoor Preschool
Portland, Oregon

Although their regular programming is from 9 AM - 2 PM, the Dandy Lions Outdoor Preschool provides extended hours for families that need it. The aftercare program allows working families to access their nature-based program.

6. Provide Full-Day Aftercare Programs

Limited school hours is another obstacle for many families. Providing full-day programs or part-day programs with aftercare can help working families participate in nature preschools.
In addition to their preschool program, Wildwood Nature School offers a caregiver and child toddler class once a week for children between one and three. The program introduces young children to nature exploration and strengthens relationships with families through adventure hikes, storytelling, and nature-based art.

7. **Offer Toddler Programs for Young Children**

Most preschools serve children between three and five years-old, meaning there are limited opportunities for nature experiences targeted towards children under three. Nature-based and outdoor preschools can expand the benefits of playing in nature to younger children and families by offering special programs for these tiny tots.

In addition to their forest school programs for children aged three to six, Bend Forest School offers a special Mini and Kind Toddler Program that focuses on children under three. The two-month sessions have a three-to-one student/teacher ratio and require parent participation. They follow a parent co-op model, requiring parents to support teachers on a rotating basis.
Overcoming Cultural Barriers

Each family has a unique experience with the outdoors that is shaped by their culture and history. Culture, which includes the shared traditions, knowledge, norms, and practices of a group of people, influences the way that families connect with the outdoors. This can impact how comfortable a family is in sending their child to an outdoor preschool.

Cultural barriers are challenges that arise from being of a different cultural background or having a different worldview to families who have traditionally accessed nature and outdoor preschools. Some families may be hesitant to send their children to outdoor preschools because of safety concerns, negative association with the outdoors, language barriers, and feelings of otherness. Schools can address these concerns by creating a welcoming atmosphere, opening diverse channels of communication, developing relationships with the surrounding community, celebrating family knowledge, acknowledging family history, and having a diverse and culturally-competent staff.

Ways to Address Cultural Barriers:

8. Share a Public Statement on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

A lot of people assume that everyone in their community feels safe being outdoors, but that’s not always the case. Creating an Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EID) statement is one way that preschools can tell their communities what they value and how they welcome different kinds of families and students. EID statements are usually living documents implemented within the school’s structure in meaningful ways. The formal, public-facing commitment is an important piece of this so that families can see what the school has committed to.

How Do I Write an EID Statement?

In addition to their mission and core values statement, the Recess Outdoor Adventure School has a public Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement on their website:

“We strive to provide a welcoming atmosphere where everyone belongs. Though not intentional, many nature based schools have traditionally been accessible only to a small handful of people due to the high cost associated with providing top notch quality programming and retaining highly qualified staff. At Recess, we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in a quality early childhood education program. That is why we have created a scholarship fund! A portion of each fully paid tuition is reserved to help provide financial assistance to a friend in need.

Further, we are in the process of researching possible funding sources so that we can offer all day programs to children of full time working parents, translate materials to multiple languages, and construct a facility that is specially designed to assist students with special needs.”

9. Help Advance a Culturally Diverse Workforce

A nationwide survey found that the racial and ethnic demographic of children in nature-based and outdoor preschools don’t reflect the general demographic of the United States, with more than four out of five children being white.9 Having a diverse staff that reflects the cultures in your community can help children and families of other racial and ethnic backgrounds feel safer and more connected in your school.

Fern and Feather Forest School
Philomath, Oregon

Fern and Feather Forest School offers free family days twice a month for current families and families in the broader community. Family Fridays meet at rotating locations around Philomath and Corvallis.

Thimble Forest School
Oregon City, Oregon

Thimble Forest School values a diverse workforce. One way that they advance staff diversity is by offering training and an assistantship to any parent interested in teaching at their school. The program provides professional development opportunities in early childhood education and forest school training for individuals who have been underrepresented in the profession.

Freckled Fawn Nature School
Central Point, Oregon

Freckled Fawn offers a free, monthly play group for families in the community with children from birth to age 6. They also offer a two-week forest school trial period so families can see if the school is a good fit.

10. Host Community Days for Local Families

Community days are a fun introduction to nature-based and outdoor preschools, especially for families who are new to the concept. Community days are an opportunity for families to experience the joy of taking their kids outside, ask school leaders questions about safety, and explore the benefits of outdoor play in a group setting. They engage current and prospective families, and are particularly important for building relationships with communities who have been historically underrepresented in these preschools.

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