

Success Story

Supporting Outdoor Learning Environments for South Carolina's Youngest Residents

Background

To reduce the lifetime risk of obesity, the Institute of Medicine recommends that obesity prevention interventions begin before the age of five. In South Carolina, 12.7 percent of children ages 2 – 4 participating in Women, Infants & Children (WIC) were obese according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation State of Childhood Obesity Report 2021. Approximately 70 percent of South Carolina children ages 0 – 5 have all available parents in the labor force. These children are likely enrolled in some form of childcare, often 8-10 hours a day, making early care and education (ECE) a priority setting for supporting healthy habits and development.

Time spent outdoors has been shown to be one of the most consistent predictors of children's levels of physical activity. Recent evidence shows that play and learning in natural outdoor environments support all developmental domains. Outdoor learning and play also benefits gross motor developmental and mental health. Yet, the outdoor areas of South Carolina child care facilities are often barren spaces, containing a few pieces of playground equipment and safety surfacing.

Promoting outdoor learning environments

Natural outdoor learning environments was a new concept for many South Carolina early childhood professionals. In 2019, the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention at the South Carolina Department of Health and Environment Control (DHEC) partnered with Nemours Children's Health to improve healthy eating and physical activity in ECE settings and systems. As part of Nemours' Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Technical Assistance Program (HKHF TAP)¹, DHEC offered high-quality training opportunities for these professionals to learn how changes in the design and management of outdoor spaces at child care facilities lead to increased time outdoors.



The primary goal of the initiative was to increase early childhood professional's understanding of the importance of outdoor learning for child development. Achieving this goal would enable those staff to recognize their role in getting children outdoors. Another priority was establishing consistent, foundational knowledge of outdoor learning environments across multiple early childhood programs and agencies in the state.

Building a foundation for lasting change

South Carolina implemented this program with a focus on sustainability. To develop a broad and lasting base of knowledge and support for policy and practice changes, the state enrolled agency staff in the Natural Learning Initiative's Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments Certificate course offered by NC State University. From 2020 – 2021, more than 90 participants from agencies across South Carolina completed the eight-course modules, including staff from: Child Care Licensing, ABC Quality, Child Care Resource and Referral Network, Child and Adult Care Food Program, Program for Infant and Toddler Care, Inclusion Collaborative, and First Steps.

During the semester-long course, these individuals participated in required lectures, videos, readings, module quizzes, and a final knowledge assessment.

Impact

With resources from HKHF TAP and DHEC, South Carolina early childhood professionals have become versed in the concept of outdoor play and learning environments. They learned how outdoor design can support active lifestyles, promote mental health and wellbeing, encourage healthy eating, and motivate learning in, about, and through nature. Their increased knowledge and support of naturalized outdoor learning environments benefits the children currently attending child care centers across South Carolina and future children that enroll in these facilities.

Additionally, state leaders are exploring how existing child care licensing regulations and quality rating and improvement system indicators may be modified or clarified to fully support the creation of high-quality outdoor learning environments.

“Adults pave the way for children to be able to be outside. We need to make outside play a priority. For me, I have made it a point to go out daily. But I did not start doing that until I added things to my yard that made me happy, like flowers and trees, benches, and yard art. We need to do the same thing for children, by making their outside environment places they want to be and spend time.”

- Outdoor learning course participant from South Carolina

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To learn more

To learn more about this success story, please contact Misty Pearson at pearsomh@dhec.sc.gov or to learn more about HKHF TAP, e-mail hkhftap@nemours.org.

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