



Eco-Healthy Child Care®



Eco-Healthy Child Care® helps early childhood learning environments to be as healthy, safe and green as possible by reducing children's exposure to toxic chemicals.

Built Environment

What is a Built Environment?

Child care facilities located in urban centers face challenges that are different from those housed in communities that have access to open green space with wildlife, trees and plant life. Built environments include the buildings, sidewalks, streets, play structures and other human-created spaces around us. As our cities develop and population grows, we create schools, apartments, shopping centers and other spaces for all to live, learn and work. The built environment is critical because it effects our physical and mental health and well-being by encouraging or discouraging positive activities. It is important to provide natural learning opportunities to promote physical, mental, and social activity that may otherwise be provided by regular access to green open spaces.

Health Concerns

Indoor pollutants: Housing materials and consumer products, such as particle board, paint, cleaners, air fresheners and carpeting, can release gasses that cause indoor air pollution, trigger asthma and may be toxic in ways that can damage a child's long term health. *See Air Quality fact sheet.*

Movement: The built environment can contribute to obesity, diabetes, asthma and heart disease, if there is not access to safe places for children to exercise and play.

Outdoor Air Pollution: Placing a child care facility near sources of pollution can increase children's exposure to air pollutants. Optimal locations for early learning programs would be away from factories, highways, gas stations, and agricultural businesses that use pesticides. Children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution because their lungs are still developing and they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults do. Poor air quality is correlated with: decreased lung function, asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, and even some types of cancer.

Natural Learning

Counteract negative consequences of the built environment by encouraging active outdoor learning. Learning and playing in the natural outdoor environment offers children: fresh air, opportunities to learn about nature, larger spaces for physical activity, and stimulation of their senses. Help to improve children's brain development and overall health by providing opportunities for vigorous physical activity and access to

green space every day.

- **Walk or bike:** Take children on a walk whenever possible – to local parks, playgrounds or other nearby locations. Encourage caretakers to walk or bike their children to child care and to the grocery store, drug store, bakery or coffee shop.
- **Arrange field trips:** Visit a local park, community garden or local farm. Arrange for experts in the community to provide learning experiences related to their work.
- **Grow organic vegetables and fruit:** Plant seeds in window boxes or in a raised bed outdoors. Watch them grow and enjoy the yummy vegetables at a picnic.
- **Promote hands-on learning:** Let children hold a ladybug or beetle in-

stead of simply reading a book about insects.

- **Go exploring:** After talking about various types of nesting habits, go outdoors and instruct children to look for nests in trees. Have them point out other places where animals live.
- **Find space for active play:** Children should have 15 minutes of “unstructured” physical activity for every hour they are in child care. Free play is essential for social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones and managing stress. Preschoolers should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time (except when sleeping). Children who learn about nature and play outside are more likely to build healthy habits for enjoyable physical activity.

Built Environment Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Children’s Health and the Built Environment
www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/children.htm
- National Environmental Education Foundation’s Children and Nature Initiative
www.neefusa.org/health/children_nature.htm
- Natural Learning Initiative
www.naturalearning.org/
- National Center for Safe Routes to School
www.saferoutesinfo.org/

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Call: 202-543-4033, ext. 13

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Eco-Healthy Child Care® (EHCC) is a science-based, award-winning national program that seeks to improve the environmental health of children by partnering with child care professionals to eliminate or reduce environmental health hazards found in child care facilities.

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