Planning for outdoor and active play

Like many aspects of planning in OSHC, planning for the outdoors is a balancing act between letting the children ‘hang out’ and providing some opportunities for active play. As professionals, OSHC staff have a responsibility to go beyond just allowing children to run off their high energy levels when they go outside. Successful planning for outdoor and active play in OSHC services should include the following key points:

- safety
- supervision
- stimulation and skills
- staff resourcefulness

**Safety matters!**

While safety matters everywhere and at all times, it is more difficult to ensure safety during outdoor and active play experiences. More childhood accidents occur during outdoor and active play. There are several reasons why this is true:

- children are using equipment, such as swings or gym equipment, which may involve risk taking
- the outdoor environment usually involves more space, making supervision more difficult
- active play often involves physical contact with other children

Supervision when children are outdoors or engaged in outdoor and active play should be carefully planned. Safety involves keeping a regular check on all the equipment being used and acting swiftly to have items repaired or removed if they become unsafe. A safety audit of all equipment and play spaces is essential in maintaining quality in OSHC.

**Supervision, not surveillance**

The old saying that, adults need to have ‘eyes in the back of their heads’ when working with children applies to OSHC staff. In single staff models this saying has special significance. Supervision requires a more active role than surveillance. Shared Visions provides suggestions for supervision strategies for outdoor and active play environments. In summary, these suggest that staff:

- Scan the space visually where the children are playing so that you can see what is happening, especially any potential problems, which are best addressed before they become serious.
- Move around the space rather than standing or sitting in one place.
- Regularly let the children know that you are aware of what they are doing by making eye contact with them or by moving closer to a child and making a comment such as: ‘Sammy, show me how you can be careful with that bat’. These contacts by eye and voice remind children that you are concerned about their safety.
- Stand, sit, observe or play with the children in a way that allows you to have maximum visual and listening supervision of the entire space and all the activities. This means you need to think about where you will position yourself so that you don’t have your back to all the other children while you are engaged with a child or a group.

- Allocate areas or activities to individual staff in larger services. Write these allocations down for each day or week so that everyone knows what spaces and activities they are responsible for.
- Work with the children to develop a list of rules for the outdoors or other spaces where highly active experiences will be offered. Keep the rules simple and focused so that all the children can remember them. For example:
  - Walk in the gym
  - Stand beside the swings when waiting for a turn
  - Wear a helmet when riding a bike

**Stimulation and skills**

The outdoors is a place where children can be supported to gain skills across all areas of development and learning. Nearly every activity that is offered indoors can be placed outside with careful planning. For children who have been in a classroom for much of the day, the chance to be outdoors is likely to be very welcomed. Even when the temperature is not ideal give children the chance to go outside, as fresh air and activity are important.

The following are some ideas for using the outdoor environment to support development and learning in a range of areas:

**Sensory development**

Offer sand and water play, which are especially enjoyable for younger children. Even older children like to mess about with water and sand, as it is very
satisfying and relaxing. Gardening, that involves planting things in soil, watering plants or weeding, can provide a similar sensory satisfaction for children. Set up messy and noisy sensory-based art activities such as working with clay or with wood outside or on a veranda.

**Kinaesthetic development**
Dancing and movement of all types including bush dancing, line dancing, rap dancing, gymnastics, aerobics or yoga exercises, are all possibilities for a wide age range of children. Invite staff or children with a personal interest or expertise in these areas to teach others. Consider using outside expertise for these activities, especially in vacation care services where special events are often organised.

**Physical development**
This is the area of development that seems to be the focus for most outdoor and active play. Physical development includes the whole body in sports such as football or netball, or specific areas of skill such as eye–hand coordination required to throw a ball at a target. Sports such as football, cricket, softball and tennis, and adaptations of these for children, are excellent activities for the development of a wide range of physical skills and coordination. *Shared visions* has further ideas for these activities.

**Social and moral development**
Most of the activities already mentioned can foster children’s social competence and moral understanding, because they often involve learning about taking turns, being inclusive to all children, sharing equipment, skills and teamwork. Promote collaboration rather than competition to support social competence. Make sure that all children are included in team sports and that the older children understand the younger children may need extra support if the games are for mixed ages. Just as in the local neighbourhood and family contexts, boys and girls and older and younger children can enjoy playing together.

**Staff resourcefulness**
Every OSHC service is different in the type of equipment, materials and spaces available to support outdoor and active play. You may need to prioritise needed resources so that limited funds are spent wisely. For example, if funds are limited and you want new balls for the children it would be best to purchase medium-sized balls which could be used by all age groups. Possible sources for equipment to borrow or be donated include:

- local sports clubs
- local schools, including high schools
- families using the service
- local businesses that might act as sponsors for sporting activity in the OSHC service
- other OSHC services in the region
- a toy library.

In addition, consider buying or borrowing books which provide a wide range of games, sport activities and physical skill ideas from a school or community library. These will give you access to ideas for planning for outdoor and active play, as will professional development in this aspect of program planning.

**Fitness**
At a time when there is community concern about children’s weight, fitness and the need for healthier lifestyles, participation and enjoyment of active pursuits is important. OSHC services can play an important role in assisting children and families recognise the benefits of activity for their overall wellbeing and for the rewards and pleasure it brings.

**Links to Shared visions**
- Chapter 4: A profile of children five to twelve, pp. 42-50 and p. 54 (planning for age-spread)
- Chapter 6 (entire chapter has links)
- Chapter 7: The outdoor environment, p. 101

**Questions and reflections**
1. What do children tell you about what they enjoy doing most outdoors?
2. What do you and your colleagues do to encourage children to engage in active exercise and games?
3. What community resources can you access to support active play and effective use of the outdoors?