

# Supporting Children with Disabilities/Exceptionalities Outside

KEY POINTS FROM THE PODCAST: [Listen here](#)



## KNOW YOUR "WHY"

Erica said "It was always worth the effort" to take her students outside

Your "why" could be:

- The multiple access points to rich, individuated learning that the outdoors offers, and the resulting sense of belonging since everyone can participate in their own way
- The language/communication skill development stimulated outdoors
- The sensory experience
- The social skill development
- The motor skill development, including spatial awareness
- The pure pleasure and joy
- The way the learning transfers to and continues at home, deepening the home/school connection



## START SMALL, LOOK FOR HELPERS

- Learning outside can look many different ways, and starting small may even mean start with smaller groups to build up confidence
- Try first moving your indoor routines or materials outside, and build up to seeing the unique possibilities in the outdoors as a learning space
- Focus on your successes! Just getting outside for free exploration is valuable!
- Find partners and allies in your colleagues and parents - this is tough to do alone
- Be willing to have dialogue with parents and caregivers - what's the value of outdoor play and learning? Show them how you've thought it through. Build trust. Allow them to express their fears and concerns, and to explore and experience the outdoor learning space with their children - there's power of letting them witness.
- Use your teams, support staff, even on a consultative basis
- Find volunteers - lots of steps to this, especially with COVID - but do what you can to bring in the extra people that you need to make it happen



## ALWAYS VISIT THE SITE BEFOREHAND, CONDUCT A RISK/BENEFIT ASSESSMENT SPECIFIC TO YOUR STUDENTS' NEEDS, AND MAKE A PLAN

- Check out the free [Canadian Risk Benefit Assessment Toolkit](#). Adapt and apply the templates for your learners and your setting.
- Think about and move through the terrain with your students in mind. What accessibility challenges does it present, and how could you work around them?
- Know your students and the specific consideration for specific diagnoses, disabilities, and exceptionalities
- What ratio do you need to support your students, and how can you find the extra people you may need?



## LEAVE ROOM FOR SPONTANEITY AND JOY: PREPARE TO BE SURPRISED!

- Plan ahead, but don't plan so much that there's no space for spontaneity or joy!
- Different students will get different things out of the same experience, will learn different things or accomplish different goals, and some of what they take from the experience may surprise you!
- Don't plan the outcomes so fully that it closes off that possibility for surprise! The depth of the learning and the possibilities may surprise you!



## LOOK FOR THE LEARNING

- Reframe for yourself transitions periods as opportunities for real learning
- Reframe for yourself your outdoor space - even a parking lot presents learning opportunities! Try to see it in a new lens, and from the perspective of your students
- Offer students a focus point - telling a story inside, about wind, for example, which inspired the children to look for things that were in the story, and stimulated students to meet their communication goals - bridged from inside to outside
- Ask open-ended questions :”why is it so hot here and so much cooler here?”
- Use the natural space/built environment as the doorway into your curriculum vs. pre planning an agenda that you can't deviate from
- Be comfortable and familiar enough with your goals/curriculum, and have a willingness to see where the environment will take you

## MEMORABLE QUOTES

Suzy: *"There is so much joy to be found outside, and we have to do everything that we are able to empower our students to find that joy and to learn to love the outdoors."*

Erica: *"Even if you don't have a beautiful natural environment, you can still find learning opportunities in a parking lot."*

## ERICA'S LEAF THERAPY STORY

*"What was your biggest surprise in taking children outside?"*

The moments of pure joy, and the realization that a very natural, simple concept, has brought someone joy, is very powerful.

I recall [in a previous position] I had students [with] very specific life skills goals and I'm trying to make use of our time and I'm planning, planning, planning and a couple members of my team said, "Can we go outside? Let's go outside. The leaves just fell. Let's make a big pile of leaves." And I'm like, oh, ok, we can go for a little bit."

This was before everything about outdoor ed. had really settled in for me, but it was actually one of those moments that really defined it, because we went outside and built that pile of leaves, and they loved it. The students were just...they wanted to be out of their chairs, they wanted to be laid down in the leaves to be buried, there was play and engagement and back and forth, "Oh I can't see you! Oh there you are!" And we're talking about students who span in age from 11-21. So a lot of communication was able to come out of that, a lot of motor skills came out of that and you know, I think sometimes we forget that we don't always have to plan each specific goal, and in a natural environment like that, so much can come out of it. It was great! We all had such smiles on our faces that day! It was fantastic!

