

18 - Building Outdoor Environments

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development inspiration that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today.

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Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Today, we are here with Jennifer Escamilla, who is a center manager for multiple preschools in Southern California. She has a master's degree in education from California State University at Channel Islands and has been in the early childhood field for 18 years.

She has a passion for advocacy work and for extending our preschool programs outdoors. Today, she will inspire us on using building outdoor environments.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: So, I have actually had the opportunity to observe in Jennifer's classroom, and I can tell you the outdoor environment was always a focal point for educators.

It was such a highlight to see, and not only was it a highlight for the adults to see, but it was actually a highlight for the children to see. So, Jennifer, when we start off, can you just tell us a little bit about your outdoor environments currently?

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Sure. So, I currently have three preschool programs, and they are all part-day sessions.

So, we have an a.m. session and a p.m. session, and one particular program has a twilight. That one is from 3 to 6 p.m., and we hold, normally, before the pandemic, we normally hold about 24 children. But since the pandemic, we are able to have up to 14 children in there.

And so, our outdoors are pretty much enriched as much as you can imagine indoors is outdoors as well. Oh, that's so great.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: So, for our audience, obviously, this is a podcast.

So, help us visualize what your outdoor environment looks like. So, if I look out the back door, and I remember being there from the twilight program. So, when I look out that back door, what am I seeing going on in the outdoor environment?

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: So, you would see a complete enriched environment.

You walk outside, for example, and you're going to see, to your right, a music environment, environmental area. And so, with that, we have an actual station where the children can actually create their own music instruments out of different recyclables that families bring in or staff bring in. And so, that's a way of them creating their own music.

We also have outdoors, also, different types of cultural instruments that we use. There is actually a piano, actually, outside, too. And then, we have families that come in, too, outdoors, well, before the pandemic.

But we look around just to make sure there's also family engagement happening outside. And normally, they can go outside and play those instruments. But we check in with them before, you know, they actually go outside to see what they are able to play for the children, too.

Then, there's also a dramatic area. So, the dramatic area holds different two things. It holds the regular home type that you see with the kitchen area and possibly, like, a lounging area for them.

But we also have dress-up areas. So, like, a theme-based, if there's children interested in a flower shop and, you know, a child was head over heels picking flowers and they went to, I don't know, maybe pick poppies over the weekend, the staff there are really good at actually turning that area into, you know, interested theme-based type of area, also in the dramatic area outdoors.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: That's so great.

So, we have music, we have dramatic play, and we also have, do we have areas that children can...

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: I'm sorry, I didn't hear that last part. ...

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: that might do, like I said, with the gross motor, excuse me. Oh, yeah.

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Yeah, also that, too. We have different types of different materials that we bring out. So, we also believe, yes, we do have a structure built in outside, but we also believe it's so important to also have the mobility type of materials outdoors for a gross motor.

So, we have the parachutes, we have the tricycles outside. We did have a family that actually donated to bring more nature outdoors. We also had tree trunks that were donated.

So, instead of having a normal balancing, you know, plastic type of balance beam outside, they had donated tree trunks to have the children balance that way. Oh, that brings... And those...

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Great idea. I love the fact that you're mentioning the donations from the community and from families, because that is really the way we, you know, we bridge that gap between home and school, and that's so exciting.

Please go on.

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Yeah. So, that was a great moment to see with... We had a child who, you know, was having a challenge trying to get across from one tree trunk to the other.

And instead of, you know, trying to tell her, oh, you know, it's not safe, you know, you might want to come down from there. We encourage them to, you know, to explore their different ways of trying to get across from there. So, it was so lovely to see another child try and help encourage the other child to get across.

So, I think not only, you know, having a gross motor outside, it actually helps the interactions with the other children, too, that we saw. And so, when the other child had noticed that the child couldn't get across, the child was willing to move the tree trunk closer to make that possible for that child. And then across the other side, you know, in addition to that, we also have different types of... I guess you would say they're like from the tree trunks, but they're sliced thinner.

And that is created actually to use for the block area. So, the children are able to build upon that. And then there's different types of, like, sheer scarves that they use to build little tents out of that for the blocks.

And then we have different types of little felt dolls that are in there. So, they can use, you know, their own play out of that in the block area, along with the recyclables that the parents donate. They donated cereal boxes, you know, different paper towel rolls, the recycled rolls that, you know, when you're done with them, they filled with that.

Yeah. So, a lot of different types of recyclables that they add to that.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah.

I think that's so cool when we kind of draw upon those materials, because we know that educators are very often tapped with their resources, especially the monetary resources. So, I think we can reach out and we can diversify our thinking of what materials we can bring in, the stronger the programs are going to be.

So, one thing that I remember about your program is the fact that you really relied on building your teachers independence.

And they then, in turn, built the children's independence. And that was one thing that I just always really admired from your program. So, can you speak a little bit to how you train the teachers or how the teachers, you know, train the students to really be immersed in that exploratory play and that learn through play philosophy?

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Yeah, I've always, you know, when I used to be a teacher, I was always that type of person that would, I wouldn't move the environment around, you know, without them, because it's so important that they learn as well.

They learn that there's, it's intentional. There's a purpose for why things are like that. And so, what I normally do as a leader in there too is I talk to them and ask them, what do you think about that, you know, that particular area? How does that work for you? And, you know, there were some ideas that I had adopted and brought back.

I had taken a trip and did a study in New Zealand a couple years back. And so, now some of the teachers that I had, they actually create a journal as to, before they move the environment, talk about the intention and the purpose and draw, they draw like a whole plan of what their idea is and what works and what doesn't work. And then they create that area and we leave that plan, you know, in the environment for families to come in and see, visitors to come and see.

So, they know that, you know, everything is intentional in there. And the interest that they really look into per, you know, per family is really, you know, taken in. They ask the family questions.

Like I say, it's a little bit different right now because of the pandemic right now. But normally we have the families come in and they actually look around the environment too because, you know, they're a part of that. The families love coming in there and, you know, helping us out with that too.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah. You know, when it starts in early childhood education, just building those positive parent partnerships and you really, your program has always done a really stellar job of that. So, as we end, can you just give our audience three takeaways that they can just, you know, walk away with and just think about today?

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Ooh, three takeaways.

I would say don't be discouraged. You know, during this time right now, I know it's a bit challenging. But reach out to your families, reach out to your local resources to be able to help support and continue the high quality that our field, you know, is known for, I would say.

You know, just continue to meet with each other and talk about what your challenges are and then how you can help, you know, support each other with that. And I would say the third one would be to set your goals, set goals up in place, you know, and don't give up. Just don't.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah, that's so.

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: Yeah. I would say no matter how long it takes, just set those goals, set two goals up for the year and you will accomplish them.

That's so important to just really set those goals that are measurable and that you're able to achieve. And again, building those parent partnerships with those. So last question for you is one challenge for our audience.

If you can challenge our audience to either think about something you said today or put in action something you said today, what is some one challenge you have for our audience?

Jennifer Escamilla Speaker: I would say, well, going back to the outdoors, you know, what can they use? Maybe that wasn't they didn't have outside today. What can they put in there tomorrow? How can they, how can they, you know, make sure that family engagement is also happening and making sure that they're also embedded into that environment outdoors.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: I love that.

And that's a challenge that we can all take on. So thank you so much, Miss Jennifer, for joining us today. And audience, please tune in and subscribe to this podcast.

We will launch a new episode each week and we will see you back here in a week. Thank you.