

69 - Making it Happen Outdoors: The Outdoor Classroom

Original Air Date: 3/15/23

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

Host Dr. Shipley: 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.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we come to you with a 10-minute professional development inspiration that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast to get notifications about future episodes.

Today, we are so excited to have with us Cynthia Hill. Cynthia Hill is a lifelong childhood educator.

She has been in the field for over 30 years and has worked at every level within the field from teacher to department chair, to curriculum specialist, to the current head of an early childhood division at a PK-8 independent school. The outdoor classroom at her school has been her passion over the past five years, and she is here to share with us today. Getting children involved in nature and letting them explore the outdoors and spark their curiosity is really their goal, and why we're here to talk to her today.

Cynthia, thank you so much for being with us.

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Thank you. I'm so excited.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Hi, Cynthia. I'm so excited to be talking to you.

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Exactly.

I'm excited to be here.

Dr Tisha Shipley Speaker: I love outdoor classrooms, and I've taught many students who actually have an outdoor classroom. I never got to have an outdoor classroom myself.

We lived in Oklahoma, so the weather was crazy when I was teaching. So, I want you to tell me, and our listeners, so we can better understand why an outdoor classroom is important, and what was your inspiration, and why did you want an outdoor classroom?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Oh, my goodness. When I first came to my school in 2015, we were a landlocked school, so there's no sort of land to do anything extraordinary in. But there was this space behind the school that had a wonky sandbox and just a big old plastic dinosaur, and I thought, oh, my goodness.

From my experience traveling, I had a chance to go overseas and see some of the things that are happening there, and I thought, I would love to embrace the outdoors. And growing up as a child, I was outdoors all the time, and so I felt like children nowadays don't get to have that outdoor experience like we did when I was growing up. I'm a little old, so way back in the day, but we spent a lot of time outside.

So that became sort of my passion to kind of get children back into nature, and exploring nature and getting dirty, because that was what I felt like was what was missing from early childhood education.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, kind of like into that, how do you make sure that your outdoor classroom, because this is a big thing, is safe for the students?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Yes, and you know, we want kids to take a certain amount of risk, you know, like climbing on a rock and jumping down, and so they can be able to kind of identify what their risk is themselves. But we are always tweaking the environment, looking at things that might be dangerous, like if a shovel breaks and it has a pointy end on it, or if a tree has broken a limb and it's got pointy things on it. But also, we do want the environment to still be outdoorsy and nothing that's fake and plastic, but it's all natural.

And so, the kids can kind of experiment with that. And if they do fall or if they climb on a log and slip off, you know, they're kind of experiencing what their own risk level is. And we have not had significant problems with that area.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: You bring up such a great point. We definitely want to consider health and safety. And a component of that right now, you know, we're always trying to be relevant in the podcast world, is what's been going on in our society with the pandemic.

So obviously, we know that has changed many things in education. How does the outdoor environment, how is that impacted during these changes?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Oh, my goodness. Well, I think the big thing was everybody was like, hey, if we're outside, you know, while the pandemic is going on, we're less likely to spread those germs back and forth.

So, the outdoors became sort of this big deal for a lot of schools, and we already had it in place. One of the big things that I focused on during the pandemic was actually expanding that time where if they had two hours outside, they might get two and a half to three hours outside, along with their outside on the playground. So, we had two areas.

We have the playground and then we have our outdoor classroom. So, they had extended time outdoors. And I think it was really important during that, that the height of that pandemic that we were outside and were able to kind of keep going without spreading the germs.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah, Cynthia, I agree with you. I mean, I was outside, and I felt most comfortable in that in that space. And I think it gave me a new appreciation for the true fact that when we don't have it, we do miss it, and we don't we don't have that connection.

So, I buy in. I'm an educator.

I buy-in as a parent.

I buy-in as an individual who recognizes the value of being outside. How do you get educators and parents who, you know, may be in a test mindset to buy into this?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Yeah, yeah.

I think that was probably my biggest challenge, was getting teachers to buy into it. You know, initially I thought, oh, cute idea, cute idea. But then when I said, OK, I need you to take your classes out for two hours.

And they looked at me like, are you kidding me, two hours outside with the kids? And literally by the end of that first year, I had teachers come back to me and apologize, and say the kids really enjoy it. And I thought to myself, well, you know, I wasn't creating it for the for you. I was creating it for the kids.

So, changing the mindset of teachers, that was a big mindset shift. But now it is remarkable to see the things that are happening there. For parents, when parents come to visit our school, one of the things that the admissions director always says, you know, they believe in play, and going outside and they're going to get dirty.

The teachers ask, you know, bring your rain boots, bring your raincoat, because if it's a rainy day and it's not stormy and it's just drizzling, we might just go jump in some puddles. And so that, you know, telling parents that up front, and letting them know this is what we believe. And if you're going to buy into our school, you've got to believe this with us.

And that has been a phenomenal shift, to see parents like this is so great. My kid comes home filthy. I know they had a great time.

So, I love that that shift has happened. And that was a challenge. That was a challenge.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, I was going to ask what your biggest challenge is, and that may have been it. But when you talk about everything, the two hours outside, I'm like, that is amazing because, you know, most of us take our kids outside for 10 to 15 minutes and that's not enough. And then they're probably going home and they're not getting that outside time anymore, like they used to.

So, is that still what is your biggest challenge thus far after you've started it? Just in case someone that's listening is trying to start an outdoor classroom, is there any other challenges they need to look for?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Well, I think just taking it slow, you know, looking at your area, looking at what you have, you don't have to do everything overnight. Everything's not going to happen overnight. We didn't build our program overnight.

It's just constantly every year we add something to it, and we build on it. And yeah, it is a challenge. And if your administrator, if you're not an administrator, if you're an administrator, you can talk to them to see if they can expand your schedule a little bit. Even if it's just giving you an extra 20 minutes outside, that you can take what you do inside and take it outside.

And that would be a big plus, even if you don't have the full-blown outdoor classroom, but you have a playground and there's so much you can do on the playground. I think sometimes we, you know, sell that short, you know, bringing things out to the playground to enhance, what the children are doing outside is a big plus as well.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Right.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: You brought up administrators, and I think it's important to consider that perspective too. Ultimately, they often are our budget and our numbers people. So, do you have any suggestions about how you were able to fund this space or what the funding sources could look like?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Yeah, I think a lot of it just we asked for a lot of things from our parent association.

If you don't have a parent association, I think even within the budget that I have with my preschool, it's just pulling out knowing that, hey, I'm going to take \$500 this year, and I'm going to let the playground committee kind of work with that and see what we can add to the outdoor area. And it does mean kind of stretching, looking at if there are any grants available. And there are some, you know, outdoor grants that are out there.

And we did a couple of what we call a contest here where they were doing beautify your classroom, beautify your outdoor spaces. And we won first place one year and second place another year. And so that gave us, you know, \$250, you know, but every little bit helps, you know, you add to the fun.

And, you know, this year you might add in some seating outside, or you buy some small picnic tables. Just, I just say, take it a step at a time. Don't try to rush in unless you got, you know, big daddy money, go out there and just do it all at once.

But just take your time, and just kind of add to it and let teachers help with that.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, I love that. I just want to add too, because I'm a huge proponent for grants.

There are so many grants out there that can help you fund things like this. So, if you are listening, go do your research on those, probably like she said, not going to be enough to fund your entire outdoor space, but a little bit of money helps everywhere. Doesn't it, Cynthia?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Absolutely.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Okay. As we wrap up, what are three takeaways that you want our listeners to remember when they walk away from your session?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: I think just really one starting small, don't try to do everything at once. I'm making sure that you understand what the benefits are of the outdoor classroom, and that you can kind of say that to the parents.

And then also, I think just getting everybody to buy into it, you know, talking with your administrator, talking with other teachers, you know, if you're a teacher, get with another teacher and say, hey, I heard this great idea. Maybe we could do something together and you'll be surprised how that will just kind of build. So, you know, taking things slow and just kind of building on it.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: I think that's great. It really gives us something to consider as starting points. So, we have that one challenge we always leave our listeners with, what might that be?

Cynthia Hill Speaker: I would say, look at what you have, look at your space, see what you can just start.

If you can just start with one little thing, maybe you create a digging space and you bring in a pile of dirt and start a mud kitchen. Just start small and just kind of build on that. I think that that would be a challenge.

Look around your school, see what you have, see what you can start with and go from there.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Okay, Miss Cynthia. Thank you so much.

Listeners, you heard it. Start small, start someplace, take that one step and you're there. Thank you so much for joining us, Cynthia.

It has been our pleasure. And listeners, we'll see you in two weeks.

Cynthia Hill Speaker: All right, great.

Thanks, guys.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Thank you.

Cynthia Hill Speaker: Bye.