

# Offsite Play and Learning Resource Guide



Parks and open spaces in Colorado communities provide fantastic opportunities to extend outdoor play and learning for young children beyond the boundaries of home or center-based child care settings. This resource is intended to help child care providers think through the steps required to safely and successfully take young children off-site.



**ECHO**  
EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH OUTDOORS



**COLORADO**  
Department of Public  
Health & Environment

## Step 1: Plan

### Assess Your Destination

#### Distance and Access

- Identify parks and other open spaces within walking distance (generally less than a half mile) of your program site.
- Select a site that is accessible to individuals with disabilities per [ADA standards](#) and that is [inclusive](#) of children with different abilities.
- Ensure that you have permission to take children to any site that you plan to visit. Check with your local parks and recreation department to determine if there are any limitations on the allowed use of public spaces. Reservations or permits may be required to use some park amenities.
- If this space will serve as your primary outdoor play environment, ensure that you are able to access the site daily and develop a backup plan in the event that it becomes unavailable.

#### Safety

- Hazards: Check for hazards at the location including nails, sharp objects, trash, animal waste, environmental hazards and open bodies of water every time you visit this location.
- Risks: Complete a [risk assessment](#)
- Safety of Play Equipment: Review the Professional Development Information System (PDIS) training entitled, “Playground Safety for Child Care Centers” and refer to the [CPSC Public Playground Safety Handbook](#). Check play equipment for condition, age-appropriateness, head entrapments, adequate use zones and well-maintained surfacing.
- Supervision: Ensure that you will be able to supervise the space and note where teachers will be stationed as they engage with children.
- Shade and Shelter: Evaluate the availability of shaded or covered areas for relief from the sun, wind, rain, snow or other weather conditions.
- Emergencies: Identify an emergency evacuation location and create a plan of action in the case of severe weather or other unexpected events.



Ensure there are a variety of settings available to support rich and diverse opportunities for young children including dramatic, gross-motor, fine-motor, creative, collaborative and contemplative play and learning.

#### Developmental Appropriateness

- Utilize the [Preschool Outdoor Play and Learning Environment Best-Practice Toolkit](#) or the [Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale \(POEMS\)](#) to assess the quality of sites to be used as primary outdoor play environments.
- Ensure there are a variety of settings available to support rich and diverse opportunities for young children including dramatic, gross-motor, fine-motor, creative, collaborative and contemplative play and learning.

#### Toileting and Diapering Needs

- Identify whether the site you are visiting has regular, year-round access to ADA compliant restrooms with flushing toilets and running water for handwashing. Determine how you will accommodate toileting and diaper changes in this space.
- Depending on the length of time you will be out, assess the need for onsite toileting or plan to transport children back to the program site to be able to meet the toileting and sanitation needs of children per licensing requirements.

# Step 1: Plan



## Assess Your Walking Route

### Distance and Challenge

- Consider the distance and level of challenge of the route you have selected and test how long it will take a class of children to walk there and back. Remember that children of different ages and developmental stages will require different supports and travel time to cover the same distance.

### Safety

- Consider completing a [walk audit](#) of your route
- Note the speed limit for the streets that you will be traveling on and choose routes with lower speed limits and light traffic when possible.
- Evaluate the route for pedestrian safety. Choose routes with good visibility, continuous sidewalks that have separation from the road and crosswalks at major intersections.
- Create a plan for how you will safely cross busy streets with children.
- Select routes that are easy to navigate for wheeled equipment including wagons, strollers and wheelchairs that may be used for transporting children, staff or materials. Choose accessible routes with curb ramps and firm, stable surfacing.
- Avoid routes with hazardous conditions such as construction sites or unsecured dogs.

### Interest and Comfort

Select routes that are interesting and comfortable for children to travel. Shaded routes with a diversity of colors, textures and plant materials at eye level will engage children on the journey and extend the outdoor play and learning experience. Allow time for children to observe their surroundings and to ask questions. Vary your route periodically to provide new experiences and prompt children to observe changes over time and throughout the seasons.

# Step 2: Prepare

**REVIEW** all applicable [Colorado Child Care Facility Licensing Rules](#) including the following sections:

- 7.707.51 Children’s Records
- 7.707.71 Health Care
- 7.702.65 Activities
- 7.702.72 Indoor/Outdoor Equipment, Materials, and Surfaces
- 7.702.74 Outdoor Learning Environment

**GATHER** Paperwork

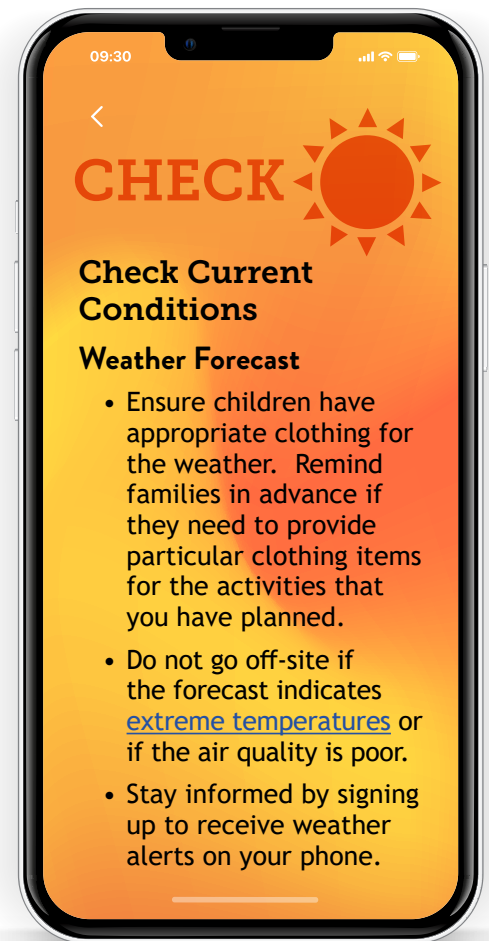
- **Permission Slips:** Ensure you have signed permission slips from legal guardians. A good practice is to keep all forms organized and in one place with a labeled file folder for each child.
- **Class List:** Be sure to note whether any children are absent or will be picked up from the destination site. Take attendance periodically to ensure that no one is left behind.
- **Medical Records:** Maintain medication lists and ensure that information on allergies or current medical conditions is updated if needed.
- **Care Plans:** Include care plans for children with special health care needs
- **Emergency Contact List**
- **Emergency Plan**
- **Evacuation Plan**

**ENSURE** your business insurance covers off-site incidents and liability

**CREATE** a Staffing and Supervision Plan

**COMMUNICATE** with Families and Staff

- Provide your schedule, explain where you are going and describe the activities that you have planned in the languages that your families prefer.
- Provide information about your emergency evacuation plan and reunification location.



**Site Conditions and Availability**

Plan an alternate play area if the site is not available or safe for play.

# Step 3: Practice

## Discuss Expectations

- Before going off-site, talk with children and staff about what to expect. Ask them if they go to parks and other open spaces with their families and what they like or dislike about those experiences.
- Read books about neighborhoods, nature exploration, local plants and wildlife and traffic safety. Answer any questions that children might have about your plans in order to address fears or anxieties about going off-site.



Reflect on what you learn from your practice outings and adapt your plans as needed.

## Model Expectations

Practice with children and staff by going on a short walk to demonstrate expectations for traffic safety and to model behaviors as you establish a new routine.

Teach and model pedestrian safe behavior.

Remind children to:

- Only cross at a corner.
- Only cross when traffic signals say it is safe.
- Always look left, right, and then left again before crossing.
- Always use sidewalks and crosswalks.



# Step 4: Pack

Pack the following materials so that you can easily transport them to and from the off-site location.



### First aid kits

Check and maintain your first aid kits, ensuring there are enough materials for the trip. Pack at least one first aid kit for each educator.



Sunscreen



Medications



Paperwork



### Toileting Supplies

Include diapers and wipes as needed.



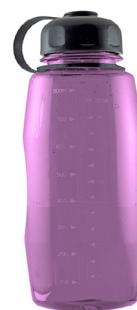
### Cleaning Supplies

Provide hand washing supplies especially if children will be eating.



### Play and Activity Materials

Pack loose parts, books, blankets, activity equipment and materials to enhance nature exploration including binoculars and magnifying glasses, bins and trays for collected materials, nature guides and identification books, art supplies and clipboards for journaling and reflection.



### Snacks and Water

Plan your snacks or meals according to the length of time you will be at the site. Always ensure that each child has their own water bottle, and adequate water for the time you will be away from drinking fountain or other potable water source.



### Extra Clothing

Accidents happen! Consider bringing an extra change of clothes in case there are accidents or spills.

## Step 5: Play

### Enjoy the Journey

- Remind children about the expectations that you set and have practiced for staying safe while off-site.
- Engage children in activities to promote observation and mindfulness during the walk. The journey can be a great learning experience!
- Ensure that all children are able to keep up with the group. Take frequent breaks if needed to allow everyone to stay together.



### Engage Children in Outdoor Activities:

- Some examples of outdoor activities that are engaging for young children include: scavenger hunts, searching for insects and animal tracks, identifying trees, plants and wildlife, playing group games, gathering or building with loose parts and found materials in nature such as pinecones, rocks, etc., creating art, engaging in free play, reading, quiet observation and much more!
- Consider sensory-based activities for children based on their age. Prompt children to look for specific colors, smells, and textures in nature. This can also be used as a topic for the reflection activity post-site visit.
- Provide a variety of choices and options. Consider providing stations to enhance the space and allow children to explore different nature-based topics (eg. local wildlife, water, weather, etc.).
- Encourage open-ended questions and allow children to lead the discussion and structure of their play and learning. Instead of telling children information, encourage them to observe their surroundings and ask questions based on their interests and curiosities.

### Maintain a Safe Environment

**Continually assess the area for hazards. Scan for:**

- Debris including glass, cigarettes, litter, building supplies, etc.
- Animal waste and other foreign material
- Safety surfacing that is inadequate or in poor condition
- Standing water, ice, or snow
- Tripping hazards or sharp elements that might cause harm
- Stinging or biting insects (anthills, beehives, or wasp nests)
- Plants that are toxic or have thorns
- Ditches, holes, wells, traps
- Exposed power lines or utility equipment
- Extreme temperature of play surfaces. Metal or plastic slides, benches, and poured concrete surfaces can get very hot and very cold. Inspect surfaces for cracks caused by temperature changes or water damage.

### Ensure that:

- Ratios are met and staff are supervising all zones. Double check your licensing requirements to comply with required ratios.
- You are complying with any posted site rules and regulations.  
(Access restrictions due to wildlife habitat restoration, refraining from picking and or taking materials from certain areas, etc.).

# Step 6: Post-Outing Routines and Reflections

## Staff Routines

- Support children in hand-washing.
- **Clean-up:** Create a clean-up routine and checklist for staff to complete after the off-site visit. This should include sanitizing, storing and replacing materials and keeping an inventory of materials that may be needed for the next off-site visit.
- **Incident reports:** Track, file and report any incidents that occurred during the off-site visit. Ensure that you communicate all information required for mandatory reporting purposes.



## Reflections and Connections

Prompt children to reflect on their experiences by having them write or draw about their day and share with the class.

**“What was your favorite sound in nature today?”**

**“What was your favorite color that you spotted in nature today?”**

**“Is there something that you saw that you want to learn more about?”**



Consider bringing nature-based resources or elements (plants, loose parts, habitats for insects, nature books) into your own space after reflecting on feedback from children. Incorporate local knowledge such as Indigenous identification resources and books into your class library.