

# OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHEN (OPK) PLANNING GUIDE



## THANK YOU

for seeing the value in an outdoor play kitchen! Community Connections for Children is here to help you make this project a reality for you and the children in your childcare center.

## AN OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHEN <<<

offers children a different way to play outdoors that allows them to reap the many benefits of extended time in nature. Nature play also meets many learning standards and addresses all the complex developmental goals we have for children, often in ways that are not possible indoors. Your intention to make this happen shows how committed you are to the health and wellbeing of the children in your care. The bonus? Extended time outdoors also supports the health and wellbeing of adults!

*Note: This guide is adapted from [Making a Mud Kitchen](#) by Jan White and Liz Edwards*

## ➤➤➤ A FEW IMPORTANT NOTES ABOUT OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHENS:

- OPKs do not need to be fancy and certainly do not need to cost much. In many cases, setting one up can be FREE with the help of donations and volunteers.
- The simplicity and unique character of creating a unique OPK from donated, found or discovered items is often the best.
- If you're not ready for dirt or mud, simply using sand and other "loose parts" makes a fun and engaging outdoor play kitchen that children will love.
- The best OPKs are made in collaboration with the children who will use them!

### IN THIS GUIDE:

- Choosing the place
- Choosing the size
- Choosing the orientation
- The flow of play
- Safety
- Working surfaces
- Organizing and displaying materials
- Cleaning up
- Photo gallery
- Planning checklist



## A FEW NOTES ABOUT DIRT AND MUD

- If you're unsure about messy play with dirt or mud, simply start with sand and natural "loose parts" (see here --->).
- To experiment with messy outdoor play, consider offering a "mud day" as a special event first, and troubleshooting the logistics.
- Whether as a special event or if messy nature play becomes a feature of your program, play with dirt and/or mud needs to be communicated with parents and all staff:
  - Dirt and mud contain microbes that support children's immune systems.
  - Dirt and mud play supports unique sensory experiences outdoors, with benefits to children that are different and often better than indoor sensory bins (bonus for teachers: the mess stays outside!)
  - Mud is a very creative material that children enjoy and learn from, and it creates positive play memories.
  - Mud and dirt play engages children and helps them focus and regulate their behavior.

# 1. CHOOSE THE PLACE

## ➤➤➤ CONSIDER BASIC MATERIALS

- **Sand and/or dirt and natural loose parts** like pinecones, rocks, safe "weeds" or other plants that can be picked, such as grass, dandelions, surplus of herbs or flowers.
- **Existing**
  - Hose, spigot, outdoor sink
  - It doesn't have to be immediately adjacent, as children love to fill containers (small and large) and transport to OPK area.
- **Mobile**
  - Bring in big pots of sand and/or dirt and loose parts
  - Seasonal natural loose parts can be added/donated:
    - Sunflowers in fall
    - Dried feed corn to push off the cob
    - Leaves, sticks, garden surplus or trimmings
    - Pea gravel, mulch, pebbles, rocks for older children
- **Clothing**
  - In warmer temperatures, children may wear bathing suits or play clothes that parents know will get dirty.
  - In cooler temperatures, waterproof layers are essential and will keep clothing clean and children dry.
    - Who will supply the waterproof layers?
      - Outerwear is an equity issue; all families may not be able to afford the proper gear.
      - Grants and community fundraising options exist to purchase the gear that allows children to enjoy the outdoors.

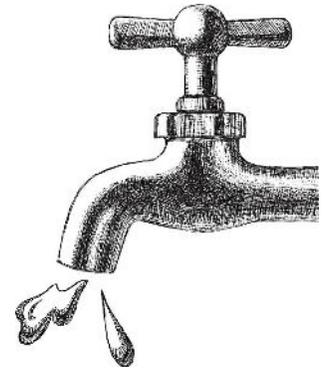


- **Clothing cont.**

- An extra full set of clothes to change into after messy play is important. Families should label all extra clothes.
- Consider if dirty clothes will be laundered at school or home.
  - If dirty clothes go home, a simple, inexpensive reusable grocery bag (grocery stores will often donate them) is ideal for transporting dirty clothes between home and school.
    - This bag should be clearly labeled with the child's photo so he/she can gain independence in managing their clothing.

## ➤➤➤ **CONSIDER A WATER SOURCE**

- **Existing**
  - Near a hose or outdoor spigot
  - Near an area where water collects or runs off:
    - Gutter run-off
    - Where puddles naturally form
- **Mobile water source options:**
  - Rain barrel with spigot
  - 5-gallon beverage dispenser



## ➤➤➤ **CONSIDER A WALL, FENCE, OR VERTICAL SURFACE**

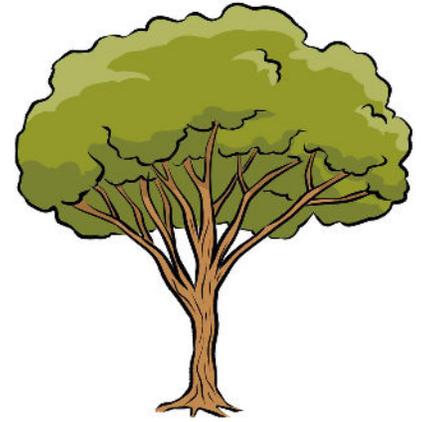
- **On one or two sides or nearby** (optional)
  - Useful for hanging pots and utensils.
  - Useful for installing shelving.
  - Creates a partial enclosure or corner, making the area cozier and more “room-like”.

## ➤➤➤ **CONSIDER DRAINAGE**

- Given that water may be used, what area of your outdoor play area drains the best, and will not become too slippery or unsafe when water and/or sand and dirt are mixed?

## ➤➤➤ CONSIDER SHADE

- During the summer, will the OPK area have at least some shade during the day?
  - Consider locating near shade trees if possible.
- If shade doesn't currently exist, do you need to add it, and what options do you have?



## ➤➤➤ CONSIDER COMPATIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Consider locating OPK near a playhouse, fort or den to enhance dramatic play.
- Consider building or adding these structures nearby if they don't already exist. For example, a tent located nearby.



## 2. CHOOSE THE SIZE

### ➤➤➤ CONSIDERATIONS

- How much space do you have in the area you're considering?
- Size will determine how it's played with, and for a small or larger number of children.

## 3. CHOOSE THE ORIENTATION

### »»» CONSIDERATIONS

- A free-standing centrally located OPK where children can work on both sides may invite more conversation and collaboration.
- An OPK along a wall or vertical surface should be large enough so several children can play, to inspire conversation and collaboration.
- Are there advantages to an “L” shape, if your setting can accommodate it?

## 4. THE FLOW OF PLAY

### »»» CONSIDERATIONS

- The OPK should interact with whatever else is going on outdoors, not be separate from it.
- The OPK should be easy to get in and out of, with room for children to play without being crowded.

## 5. SAFETY

### »»» CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure that the OPK is oriented so that adults have visibility into the area for supervision.
- If upcycled materials are used (for example, pallets or used boards) check all surfaces for safety:
  - Remove any nails or staples.
  - Sand rough edges.
  - Consider exterior paint or polyurethane to cover rough surfaces (and make the wood last longer).





## BASKETS, MILK CRATES AND OTHER CONTAINERS

- Useful to organize and separate utensils, pots and pans.
- Label all containers with laminated photos (with words, to encourage literacy) to help self-direct children in clean up with less help from the adults.

### Safety cont.

- The OPK structure should be tip-proof.
  - Design should incorporate a wide, heavy base if possible.
  - If the OPK is not stable or may tip if a child climbs on top or pulls on it, it should be anchored to the ground or a wall/fence.

## 6. WORKING SURFACES

### ➤➤➤ CONSIDERATIONS

- The height needs to be right for children in your program.
- If children of multiple ages/sizes are using it, consider including several different heights.
- Do you have any children with mobility issues, and if so, how can the design incorporate them?

## 7. ORGANIZING AND STORING

### ➤➤➤ CONSIDERATIONS

- Hanging each item or displaying on shelving means that children see what's available to play with and clean up is simpler (versus a big bin where everything is in a pile that children have to dig through).
- Consider the height and type of hooks that are placed so that children are unlikely to be poked in the eye/face.
- Use laminated photos (with words to encourage literacy) or create an outline for hanging pots/utensils so children can see where they go when they are done using them.

## 8. CLEAN UP

### »»» CONSIDERATIONS

- There is value in children returning to the same play day after day.
- Remember that when the area is organized and labeled, clean up time doubles as a time for children to classify, sort, count and categorize.
- Decide clean up protocols/plans ahead of time:
  - Does a full clean up have to occur daily? If so, why?
    - If you want to “re-set” the OPK area, how will you decide when to do this?
      - For example, prior to weekly mowing, or perhaps each Friday you prefer to re-set the basic materials.
  - Where will old mixed-up material go after use? (sand, dirt, plant material, loose parts, etc.)
  - How will you involve children in the clean up?
    - Consider a group conversation to involve the children in a problem-solving discussion re: how to care for your new OPK area.
      - Invite children to give suggestions on how the group can care for the space.
      - Including the children in these decisions gives them more ownership and may encourage more participation in care of the area.
    - If the adults make the decisions regarding clean up, share the basic protocol for clean up ahead of time so that children understand the expectations.
    - Consider a fun song to initiate outdoor clean up time, with the goal of making clean up a friendly group effort.
    - A clean up game to play is to ask every child to go find and put away 3 items, then return to the group. If items remain, choose another number. Keep it fun, playful and achievable for children so they stay with the task.
    - Consider having an OPK job or “helper” (or two) who monitor the area, and help return pots/pans/utensils, etc. at the end of outdoor play.
      - Consider letting the children volunteer for jobs, rather than adults assigning them, so that children feel more ownership of the task/responsibility.

# OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHEN PHOTO GALLERY

## ➤➤➤ AS YOU VIEW THESE PHOTOS AND DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH:

- What do you notice about these outdoor play kitchens?
- Which ones seem mobile/temporary versus more permanent additions to the outdoor play area?
  - What features do you like and want to add to your OPK wish list?
  - What questions or concerns do you have?













## ➤➤➤ NOW IT'S TIME TO PLAN YOUR OWN OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHEN!

You might be surprised how many people will be excited about this project, so share your intentions early on, and gather interest from staff, families and your community before you get started. Consider involving a core group in all the stages of setting up your OPK.

Teamwork makes dream work, and having a group of people involved will build community and ownership of this fun, engaging addition to your outdoor play area!

# OUTDOOR PLAY KITCHEN (OPK) PLANNING CHECKLIST

## ➤➤➤ USE THIS CHECKLIST TO GUIDE YOUR OPK PLANNING PROCESS

Remember that you can start small and add on later; the idea is just to start! There is space under each checklist item to add your notes.

	TASK	DONE
01	<p>Date when your OPK will be ready to go has been chosen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep in mind you can set up a temporary OPK first and observe how the children play and gather their input before building your permanent one.</li> </ul> <p>Date:</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
02	<p>General "style" and design has been chosen.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
03	<p>Resources available to you from families/your community have been identified.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
04	<p>The spot in your outdoor play area best suited for your OPK has been chosen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is this spot near compatible activities such as a playhouse, tent, or fort? If not, can you add these elements later?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
05	<p>Water source options identified.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	TASK	DONE
06	<p>Starting materials have been identified. Options: sand, natural materials, loose parts, and/or dirt/mud.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remember: start small and simply, and where you're comfortable. Dirt/mud can come later if that idea overwhelms you.</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
07	<p>A wall or fence is identified, or vertical surface is added to the design.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
08	<p>Drainage has been considered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Another benefit to setting up a temporary and/or mobile OPK is that you can literally "test the water" and see where it pools or runs off, and if a different location would be better.</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
09	<p>Shade has been considered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If no shade, how can you add it if needed during the warmer months?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	<p>Approximate dimensions have been chosen, including height, length, width, and orientation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you need more than one working surface to accommodate all the children?</li> <li>Do you have any children with mobility issues, and how can the design incorporate them?</li> <li>Will your OPK be against a wall or fence, L shaped, or free standing so children can work on both sides?</li> <li>Who can create a sketch?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	TASK	DONE
11	<p>What material resources do you have available for your OPK?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tires</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Milk Crates</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Old door/s</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Wooden planks</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pallets</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Donated wood</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor furniture pieces that someone is no longer using (benches, shelving, etc. These pieces can add function and uniqueness to your outdoor play kitchen)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Kitchen utensils</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pots/pans</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Small kitchen appliances that no longer work (e.g., kids love having an old microwave in their outdoor play kitchen!)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Do you have a grocery store nearby that might donate reusable grocery bags (one for each child and a few extra to organize extra gear)?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who is willing to ask, pick up, and send a thank you note if bags are donated? -----</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	<p>Support people have been identified.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff, parents/guardians/family members</li> <li>• Community members</li> <li>• Anyone else who may be interested and/or have the skill set you need:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Carpenters</li> <li>◦ Wood workers</li> <li>◦ Motivated volunteers who see value in nature play</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	TASK	DONE
13	<p>Funding for supplies has been identified (example: pea gravel, extra sand, thrift store pots/pans/utensils if they are not donated <b>and</b> waterproof outerwear so that children can enjoy the outdoor play kitchen in all seasons).</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14	<p>A clean up plan has been established and communicated to all children and teachers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Frequency of clean-up is chosen</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> All storage bins, baskets, shelves, etc. are labeled</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Location where old mixed-up materials will go is established</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Plan to involve children in process is chosen</li></ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15	<p>All parents/family members have been communicated with and have had a chance to ask questions and discuss any concerns.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>