



## Frequently Asked Questions related to Outdoor Learning Environments:

What the experts say . . .

### NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance

Child care providers have many questions about what they can, and can't do, on and in their outdoor area. They have concerns that there may be violations or demerits from the licensing consultant, the environmental health specialist or from an environment rating scale assessor if they are having an assessment done for a rated license. In an attempt to dispel some of the concerns that are floating around, listed below are some of the most frequently asked questions about outdoor learning environments. We are all committed to removing barriers to staff taking children outdoors, while still ensuring that the experiences that the children have are healthy, safe and enriching.

As new questions are received they will be added to this list. We hope that you find them helpful as you work to enhance your outdoor area for the children in your care. This resource is in development and is not yet complete, but it does hold valuable information that can be used as it is completed. The questions and issues included in this handout have been given attention from the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, the Division of Child Development, and Children's Environmental Health Branch with position statements (in development) from the NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance.

**NOTE: The agencies and organizations providing the answers to the questions below are specified by the following initials and color codes:**

- **NC OLE Alliance – North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance**
- **NCRLAP – North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project - responsible for the environment rating scales assessments.**
- **DCD – The Division of Child Development - responsible for child care licensing.**
- **CEHB - Children's Environmental Health Branch - responsible for the health inspection rules and training of environmental health specialists.**

## **NC OLE Alliance Position Statement "Digging in the Dirt":**

There is tremendous value in having youngsters experience, work and play with dirt. In stating this, we are not suggesting activities using the dirt that you find at the edge of your parking lot that may contain car oil run-off or animal feces. Rather we are alluding to the rich soil that exists in your school or home garden or in your woods. The friable feeling of dirt, the fragrance of it and the different types of soil youngsters can discover and learn about all contribute to a rich sensory experience for children.



Our state has such a broad variety of soils. We have the clays of the Piedmont, the stony soils of the Mountains, the sandy and peaty soils of the Coastal Plain. Each type of soil allows children to experience an array of textures and encourages them to explore and to make discoveries. Here are some suggested activities to get you started:

- Investigate what kind of soil you have in your play yard – under the trees, by the garden – in the different places that make up your outdoor learning environment.
- Have children bring in a baggie of soil from their own backyard and encourage them to compare them.
- Bring in different types of soil for children to explore; rich mulches, topsoils, silts, sands and clay.
- Make your own soil using leaves, sand and soil from the ground and explore a range of soil recipes.
- Investigate the creatures who live in the soil; earthworms, insects and roly pollies. Look for pebbles and other natural matter in the soil.
- When it rains allow children to discover how the soil turns into mud and malleable clay.
- Provide opportunities for children to turn that rain soaked soil into mud pies and pots and to sculpt soil when it's wet.
- Use your existing flower beds and raised beds for digging and discovery.
- Shake soil from the school yard in a jar and discover what floats, what remains suspended and what settles to the bottom of the jar.

The possibilities that explorations with soil/dirt provide for learning and sensory experiences for children are endless! So, start digging!

### **1. Is it really ok to have a dirt pile for the children to dig in on your playground? If so is a cover needed? (One suggestion is to have a large round "swimming pool tub" to put the dirt in, or a type of sand table that can be covered. However, can a dirt area be created that has borders with a cover similar to a sand pit play area?)**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> - Yes, dirt is fine as an alternative to sand play. To earn credit, there must be evidence that providing dirt play is intentional; meaning that there is enough to dig in, scoop, pour, experiment with and additionally there should be materials or tools provided for children to use such as shovels, etc. Higher levels of quality require more variety in materials and also increased frequency of sensory play experiences. When infants and toddlers are enrolled a cover is</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - Dirt pile would be acceptable but would need to be maintained.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Handwashing is required after outdoor activity. Sandboxes are required to allow for proper drainage, covered when not in use and kept clean. Similar recommendations would be made for a "dirt area". In addition, the history and source of the soil would be important information. Where was the dirt obtained? The concern is potential contaminants such as lead or pesticides.</p>
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<p>required for outdoor sand (or alternative substance) play. For older children a cover is not required, but is recommended. If contamination (such as from animals) was observed this is scored in the health item. Handwashing is required when children return indoors after "dirt" play, just as handwashing is required after sand play.</p>		
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**2. If we do have dirt for children to dig in, what type of dirt should it be....dirt from the earth or should we buy topsoil/dirt from a nursery?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> - There is not a specific type of dirt/soil that is allowable for the rating scales – it is a program choice. If purchasing soil, child care providers should read the label carefully and make sure there are no hazardous chemicals or fertilizers included in the mixture.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - We would defer to Environmental Health on this topic.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Dirt should come from a "clean" source and be free of contaminants such as lead and pesticides.</p>
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**3. We use mulch as surfacing for our playground equipment and it tends to deteriorate and become dirt. As our mulch becomes compacted and new mulch needs to be added, but it also makes our fence shorter than 4 ft. high. So we have to remove the old much, before we put in new mulch so that our fence remains the required height of 4 ft. from the surfacing. Evidently, compacted mulch cannot be measured or counted accurately. Who can we get to remove it?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – Mulch is considered to be protective surfacing as long as it can be differentiated from dirt. In terms of removing older mulch, a CPSI or landscaper is the person to check with for advice for a specific site. To determine the depth of loose-fill surfacing, assessors use metal probes to dig with. The surface is turned up in multiple locations to determine if it is a consistent type and also the required depth.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – One thing that centers need to think about is how close they are placing equipment to a fence which would require them to have mulch all the way to the fence line. By placing equipment farther away from fences, and therefore only needing mulch that stops maybe 2 or 3 feet away from the fence line, a center would never have an issue with a fence being too short. Often a center will just put down mulch on the whole outdoor area, instead of just in the fall/use zone. Providers may also want to think about digging down before adding mulch so that they're actually putting the mulch in to a sunken area. That keeps the mulch contained more easily, and it takes away any issue about the fence no longer rising 4 feet above the ground.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Professional landscapers should be able to assist with the removal of mulch. Be mindful that tilling rotting mulch may release large volumes of mold spores. Also, sunken areas underneath mulch may hold standing water which promotes insect breeding and, therefore, must be minimized</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement "Composting":**

Children can learn much from a simple project like composting. Composting is a great practice to model in that it takes "waste", food scraps, clippings, and other items and makes it useful. It becomes rich, wonderful soil! Children can learn to identify what should and should not be composted and they can watch as worms munch away and turn the pile into the soil they can use in their garden.



It is important to keep in mind that some food scraps should not be composted, such as meat scraps, dairy products or products containing oils. It is also important to know that if worms want to eat these scraps, other critters may want to as well! In order to not attract vermin or unwanted critters, the compost system must be covered and well contained.

**4. We are thinking of starting a compost pile with the children. Will this be permitted by DCD and Environmental Health folks? One center is doing this right outside of their fence area. However, can this be done safely inside the fenced play space?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – There would be no safety concerns unless the area was not maintained well. Involving the children in the composting process would count as an example of a nature/science activity considered for the ECERS-R, FCCERS-R, and SACERS.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - Again, maintenance is a key issue. Failure to maintain properly could result in odor, bugs and other rodent problems.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Sanitation rules require composting areas be covered and maintained to prevent attracting rodents or vermin. In addition, worm bins must be kept covered. Handwashing after such activity is a requirement. The local Cooperative Extension Office may be helpful. Some compost may contain rotting food material.</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement “Inclusion of Natural Elements in the Play Yard”:**

We are hearing more and more frequently that children today are not spending time outdoors. A strong concern is that children are not learning first hand about nature and are not connected with the natural world. They may see nature in books or on television, but they often do not experience it themselves. This is one of many reasons to include natural elements in the play yard. Children learn from their play and they play with all that is in their environment. Adding natural elements to the outdoor space can bring learning to real life opportunities - science, math, and literacy skills emerge as children observe, notice, count, and become exposed to new vocabulary as they are immersed in the natural world around them.



Natural elements also provide the loose parts for the outdoor classroom – leaves to gather, rocks to turn over, even rain to measure! Using natural shade provisions such as trees or arbors with vine coverage ensures that children will notice the change of seasons as leaves grow, drop, vines flower, leaf out, and change over time. If your outdoor space is lacking in natural elements, it is easy to bring in transportable items such as rocks, hay bales, stumps, other items that children can see, touch, smell, manipulate and learn about.

**5. Are large stones and/or rocks considered tripping hazards inside the fenced area? We are thinking of using them as borders to create a garden space or perhaps as part of our outdoor learning environment activities and décor.**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – If the stones are in traffic paths this would be considered as a safety concern (tripping hazard) for the ERS; but typically as a border should not be a problem.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – For borders, if the stones or rocks are easily visible then they are not considered tripping hazards. Providers need to think about where they are being placed versus placing in pathways. Tripping hazards are reduced or eliminated by ensuring that the rocks are visible color wise – not having dark rocks that blend in with the surroundings so children might be less likely to see them.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> – This would not be an environmental health issue.</p>
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**6. In seeing the slides during the Outdoor Learning Environments training on POEMS, the trainer showed a picture of two boys going from stump to stump. She mentioned that the stumps were between 12 and 18 inches high. Do you have to have mulch around these stumps for ECERS? If it is ok with licensing, is it ok with the ECERS assessment folks? If yes, then how much mulch or what depth is needed?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – Only equipment (either natural or man-made) that is over 18 inches high must have protective surfacing and adequate fall-zones, so these stumps would not need mulch or a fall zone. If children are encouraged to climb or step onto stumps, the stumps should be steady to reduce the risk of falls. When children play on</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – The requirement for surfacing is for any equipment that is over 18” (as of recent rule changes adopted by the Child Care Commission with a proposed effective date of November 1, 2007) However, you also need to consider if the stumps are secured by size or placement so that children aren’t going to jump on to one that is</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> – This would not be an environmental health issue.</p>
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<p>stumps or rocks of any size, assessors watch to see how the supervision is handled, so if there is crowding, pushing, several falls, etc. then this sort of issue would be considered in the supervision item depending on severity.</p>	<p>tippy and then dumps them over on to another stump or child.</p>	
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**7. Would stumps in general on the playground be considered a health and safety issue due to splinters? What will the ECERS folks say?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – If the stumps were splintering this would be considered as a minor safety concern for the Environment Rating Scales.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – Maintenance is key. Splintering would also be a violation for DCD.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> – This would not be an environmental health issue.</p>
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**8. Can we have stumps on our playground with lichens or small mushrooms growing on them? Our playground has children between the age of 2.5 years and six years that play on it?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> - Assessors walk around the outdoor environment to look for obvious safety or health concerns. If children handle wild mushrooms or these are found in the children’s play space (as compared to a supervised growing activity of non-poisonous mushrooms) this would typically be noted as a safety concern. We are unaware of situations when lichen has been considered a safety concern; however anytime children are observed “eating or tasting” materials not intended as food items this is likely to show up as a supervision/safety concern, depending on the type of material and children’s ages.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - We would defer to Environmental Health on this topic.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - This would not normally be recommended since some mushrooms are poisonous and could be hazardous if ingested. If the mushrooms have been identified and are not poisonous, it would be fine.</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement “Learning about Birds, Bugs, and other Critters”:**

Some experts say that children today know more about dinosaurs and animals in far away places than they know about the critters that live in their back yards. Schools and early care and education programs can provide opportunities for children to see and learn about the habits of birds, bugs, squirrels, butterflies, and other wildlife that is common to the area. Settings that bring wildlife close and observable to children can be simple and affordable. Supportive materials such as paper and pencils, art supplies, microscopes, binoculars can bring out the scientist in a child.



**9. If we put up bird feeders, what type is acceptable? Humming bird feeders are probably not the issue; however, we are wondering about other bird feeders as the seeds may drop on the ground and/or droppings from the birds.**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – We do not know of a situation when a bird feeder has caused a concern for assessments in NC. If children are observed eating bird seeds that have fallen on the ground (more likely for the infants/toddlers) this would be considered in the supervision and health items.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – DCD is not aware of any concerns or problems that have arisen around bird feeders. You wouldn't want to promote/attract vermin however.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Requires premises to be maintained in a manner which does not encourage the harborage of vermin. Effective measures shall be taken to keep uncontained insects, rodents, and other vermin out of child care centers and to prevent their breeding or presence on the premises. Bird food that has spilled on the ground will attract rodents, which may attract snakes looking for a food source. It is recommended that these areas be hosed down daily to minimize potential problems.</p>
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**10.If we have a bird bath, how often does the water need to be changed or the bath cleaned?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – If children had access to water that appeared contaminated this would be considered in the health item.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – Stagnant water would be an issue. Also, dependent upon the type of bird bath/construction – it would need to be determined if there was any drowning hazard presented.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Items that can collect standing water in the OLE are required to be emptied and stored to prevent standing water. The water should be changed daily to prevent an ideal environment for mosquito breeding.</p>
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**11.Is it ok to dig for bugs or use a “carpet lift up” or plastic bath mat to attract and watch bugs?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> - Assessors consider the overall maintenance of the outdoor area for repair/maintenance, safety, and sanitation issues. Evidence of potentially dangerous insects (poisonous spiders, wasp nests) is a safety issue. However, if children were observed lifting up a rock or mat to see bugs this would generally not be a concern. Assessors always consider the</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – Bugs are a natural part of the outdoor area so there is no way to keep all bugs away. An infestation is different and would not be acceptable. Children can roll away logs or any other flat item on the ground to watch bugs but having this activity farther away from the building may minimize bugs coming in to the building. There's a difference in digging or watching for</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Sanitation rules require effective measures to keep uncontained insects, rodents, and other vermin out of child care centers and to prevent their breeding or presence on the premises. The pit digging area would need to be contained to prevent the insects from spreading to uncontained areas of the premises or into the child care center.</p>
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<p>quality of supervision provided and whether staff are aware of children's activities. When language occurs with staff and children related to such an activity this earns credit in the nature/science item for using everyday nature/science events as a basis for learning about the natural world – as long as there is some relevant, factual content.</p>	<p>bugs and digging in red ant hills. Also, the type of activity described in the question should not be an excuse for a swarm of cockroaches in the center.</p>	
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**12. Rule .2831 was amended effective August 2, 2007 and includes a prohibition against keeping amphibians as pets. Does this preclude keeping tadpoles at child care as an educational project for children to observe the development of tadpoles into frogs?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – Tadpoles would be credited in the nature/science item, in addition to other more common examples of living things such as plants or fish. Should children handle the tadpoles or touch the water, then handwashing is expected.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - We would defer to Environmental Health on this topic.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Tadpoles are allowable as part of an educational project with the understanding that they would not become permanent pets. A plan should be in place for getting rid of the adult frogs. Most important is the need for handwashing as specified in Rule .2803, in this case to prevent the transmission of salmonella. Handwashing is particularly important if children handle the tadpoles (not recommended) in addition to observing the developmental changes.</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement "Seating & Spaces Outdoors to Observe and Just Be":**

Seating outdoors can provide a space for a child to observe others and take a rest from active play. A small bench for two can be a space for a child to be alone or with one friend for a quiet moment. We often think of outdoor time as time when children should be physically active and it is great for that purpose. A well designed outdoor space is rich in play and learning opportunities, always holds the possibility for physically active play but also spaces for relaxing, observing, choosing to be alone or together with a friend. Seating can be simple, such as a stump, a log, a blanket, or it can be a bench or chair. Placed by a bed of rosemary or colorful garden, a seating space could be fragrant and offer much to observe as birds and butterflies visit the plants.



**13. What type of bench swing would be acceptable for children and adults? Is there a glider type that can be used/purchased, or can we hang a traditional one under our covered porch area? We really like the idea that adults and children could use it together, read stories or rock etc. Could you provide a picture of one that is acceptable?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – Bench swings are not considered playground equipment and do not require protective surfacing. However, close supervision is required to ensure that children use them safely. The larger glider swings sometimes cause problems with crowding and children pushing the heavier seat into another child, knocking each other over, etc, so supervision and placement of these swings should be considered.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – The weight of the swing is licensing’s biggest concern, either with an adult swinging on one and kids running behind and being hit, or with one child pushing a swing and getting it started swinging and it hitting another child. For a typical porch swing/glider on a deck we would not expect mulch, but the other issues could present possible concerns.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> – This would not be an environmental health issue.</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement "Having a Picnic":**

Anything you can do inside, you can do outside – but it may take some planning and thought to do it in an early care and education setting. Picnics are a good example of an activity that does take some planning and forethought. The good news is that once the system is worked out, it is easy to repeat and even make having a picnic a regular practice. We often rush through meal time to move on to the next activity. Just taking the care and time to be outdoors to eat creates a more relaxing environment for appreciating food. It is a wonderful way to have time for conversations about the things children are seeing and hearing and clean-up is much easier outdoors.



**14. We would like to have snack time outside and/or our lunch time with our children. Having a picnic can be a lot of fun. Can you tell us how this can be done and still meet licensing and/or ECERS requirements as to hand washing, family style dining etc.?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – All of the health requirements still apply for outdoors and since tables outside usually can not be cleaned/sanitized properly, table cloths may be used to cover wooden picnic tables. Handwashing is required so programs may figure out a way to have running water outdoors or have the picnic first so children wash hands and head to the tables right away before playing. Remember that if having a picnic causes some challenges to the regular sanitation practices, a lower score on a single item will not greatly impact the overall average score across all items. So higher scores in other items (such as interactions, nature/science, etc.) will balance out a lower score in the meals/snacks item.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> - Handwashing and a table cloth should address any licensing concerns.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - When food service is provided in the OLE, food shall be protected, stored, prepared and served in accordance to 15A NCAC 18A.2806, 2807 &amp; 2808. Employees and children shall wash their hands in accordance with .2803 and food service tables shall be cleaned or covered prior to use.</p>
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**NC OLE Alliance Position Statement “issues around mulch”:**

Mulch is used on many outdoor environments as surfacing for gross motor equipment. It has advantages and disadvantages when used for that purpose. The advantage is that it is relatively affordable and easy to find. One disadvantage is that it becomes compacted and requires regular maintenance to ensure that it is “fluffed” and maintains proper depth in high use areas such as the exit of slides or underneath swing seats. Mulch also decomposes over time and eventually loses the effectiveness as a protective surface. It actually becomes soil, given enough time. When used as a protective surface for gross motor equipment, mulch should be regularly inspected, maintained, replenished, and replaced as needed to protect falls and meet proper depth requirements.

Mulch is also used frequently to define an area or in garden beds to control weeds. When used for this purpose it can offer a great digging opportunity for children and does not have to be inspected or maintained at any particular depth. It offers a different texture for children to experience and lots of discoveries such as worms and bugs.

**15. We use mulch as surfacing for our playground equipment and it tends to deteriorate and become dirt. As our mulch becomes compacted and new mulch needs to be added, but it also makes our fence shorter than 4 ft. high. So we have to remove the old mulch, before we put in new mulch so that our fence remains the required height of 4 ft. from the surfacing. Evidently, compacted mulch cannot be measured or counted accurately. Who can we get to remove it?**

<p><b>NCRLAP</b> – Mulch is considered to be protective surfacing as long as it can be differentiated from dirt. In terms of removing older mulch, a CPSI or landscaper is the person to check with for advice for a specific site. To determine the depth of loose-fill surfacing, assessors use metal probes to dig with. The surface is turned up in multiple locations to determine if it is a consistent type and also the required depth.</p>	<p><b>DCD</b> – One thing that centers need to think about is how close they are placing equipment to a fence which would require them to have mulch all the way to the fence line. By placing equipment farther away from fences, and therefore only needing mulch that stops maybe 2 or 3 feet away from the fence line, a center would never have an issue with a fence being too short. Often a center will just put down mulch on the whole outdoor area, instead of just in the fall/use zone. Providers may also want to think about digging down before adding mulch so that they’re actually putting the mulch in to a sunken area. That keeps the mulch contained more easily, and it takes away any issue about the fence no longer rising 4 feet above the ground.</p>	<p><b>CEHB</b> - Professional landscapers should be able to assist with the removal of mulch. Be mindful that tilling rotting mulch may release large volumes of mold spores. Also, sunken areas underneath mulch may hold standing water which promotes insect breeding and, therefore, must be minimized.</p>
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