POEMS Assessment Tool

Creating a balance of outdoor play, learning, and fitness for preschool children requires more than just an enclosed space with safe equipment. The area should also promote inquiry, imagination, and adventure, but until recently, child care providers had no way to formally rate outdoor spaces with these criteria in mind. That is, until Karen DeBord and her colleagues stepped in.

In 1999 and 2000, playgrounds across North Carolina were being stripped of old equipment and updated with safer, more colorful anchored items. “Safety for our children is critical, but there’s more to quality outdoors than safety,” says DeBord, a professor and child development specialist at North Carolina State University. Focusing on outdoor environments for children ages three to five, she teamed up with other experts to answer, “If you compare Playground A to Playground B, how do you know which is a better learning setting for a child?”

An original member of the National Network for Child Care and the National Network for Family Resiliency in the early CYFAR days, DeBord has long provided leadership in the child care field, and her role in this project was no exception. After obtaining grant money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, DeBord helped to lead a think tank of academic, research, and extension professionals with expertise in child development, landscape architecture, and health and safety.

To get the ball rolling, the five-person team hosted a meeting with about 35 other child development experts to brainstorm what makes an outdoor preschool environment successful. That one-day meeting paved the way for ongoing future discussions, an extensive literature review, and a research study with 41 programs and 162 children. The development process culminated with the Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS), published by Kaplan Early Learning Company in 2005.

Adults can and should learn how to use the outdoors to stimulate
children’s thinking.

DeBord says that establishing the scale’s validity was a challenge since there was no similar research-based scale to compare the data with. As an alternative measure, the development team conducted formal observations of children’s outdoor free play on 41 different playgrounds, comparing the quality of play with several child indices.

Correlations between child behaviors and the total POEMS scores indicated that, on lower quality playgrounds, children engaged in more repetitive types of play, which require minimal cognitive skills. Children in higher quality environments, on the other hand, displayed more constructive play such as building, exploring, and hypothesizing.

Rounding out the validity testing, the POEMS scores were correlated with the North Carolina star-rated license those 41 programs received; 1-5 stars based on points in staff education, standards, and compliance history. At the time, North Carolina was one of the few, if not the only, state with such a rating system in place. This correlation showed that overall program quality is related to the quality of the outdoor play area.

“Safety for our children is critical, but there’s more to quality outdoors than safety.”

~Karen DeBord

Along with complete reliability and validity details, the 30-page POEMS booklet features a user guide and glossary, key learning points, scale items, scoring protocol, and a self-improvement plan. “It’s not a continuum of points,” DeBord explains. “The item is either present or it’s not, which makes it easy for teachers to determine what to work on.”

In order to promote learning, a child’s outdoor play environment should facilitate interaction with peers, teachers, and the natural world.

The scale contains 56 items grouped in five domains: the “Physical Environment” takes everything from air quality to ground surface drainage into account. “Interactions” looks at how well the outdoor space facilitates a child’s interactions with peers, adults, objects, and natural materials. “Play and Learning Settings” are specifically designed play settings (much like indoor centers) with storytelling circles, elevated work spaces, moveable objects, and other suggested items. The “Program” section views the outdoor space as an extension of the classroom in all curriculum areas while “Teacher/Caregiver Role” focuses on how teachers can enhance outdoor experiences for children.

Recent statistics show that more than 2 million American preschoolers attend daycare. Most of those daycare facilities are required to offer just 20-40 minutes outside per day. With so many children spending so much time within four walls, a quality outdoor experience is vital to their health and well-being. Thanks to POEMS, teachers, parents, landscapers, and other community members can work together to make the outdoors a place where children will long to learn.

Common Measure:
Parenting [1]
Physical Activity [2]
Year published or updated:
2007
Author(s), Presenter(s):
DeBord, K.
References & Resources:
- To read more about the POEMS assessment tool, visit www.poemsnc.org [3].
- To download the POEMS handout, go to http://www.poemsnc.org/handout.doc [4].
- For ordering information, search for "POEMS? at www.kaplanco.com [5].

Outcome Age Category:
Early Childhood [6]
Core Competencies:
Program Implementation [7]
Program Evaluation [8]

Source URL: https://cyfar.org/resource/poems-assessment-tool

Links
[8] https://cyfar.org/resource-core-competencies/program-evaluation