Position on Outdoor Environment

At UHMCC, it is not just a playground it is also an outdoor classroom. Children continue to learn where ever they are, and because outdoor time tends to be less restrictive than indoor time they get to take charge of the activities. These child-guided activities may focus on social learning, like how to move between social groups, but they are just as likely to include observations of insects, the differences between wet and dry sand, and the way some flowers smell but others don’t.

Our playground has a jungle so children can hide, explore and interact with nature. We have a large variety of plants to taste and smell. We have a loose parts area so children can build grand structures that may also be able to roll marbles down ramps. There are man-made climbing structures, but also nature-made climbing structures (also known as a Shower Tree or a Mock Orange bush). There is also a back area for playing soccer or baseball or beanbag toss. These connections with nature help develop a sense of awareness and responsibility toward the protection of natural resources. We challenge the children to explore with all their senses, including proprioceptive and vestibular sense. We therefore roll out mats for guided wrestling, fabric hammocks, and balance bikes along changing terrains. This gross-motor development also helps develop positive attitudes toward active lifestyle habits. We also use the large banyan tree as a shady gathering place for storytelling, and a house-like structure for inspiring dramatic play.

Tables are available for drawings, cooking, worm casting collection, or other fine motor work. Exploration tools, such as magnifying glasses and trowels, are available as needed. We rotate out materials to challenge and expand work within our curriculum. Our water table doubles as a volcano or cauldron at the top of the playground. The water drains to create a stream that moves down the playground to the sandbox to create a model of Manoa Stream, moving from mountain to beach. We created a model of the Kanewai lo‘i so children could work out new information or develop new questions in their own time, and then more deeply explore Kanewai as we repeatedly return to it. You will often find work normally done inside brought outside to increase engagement.

In our front yard we have chickens that provide us with the eggs we use when we do cooking activities. We grow ipu, which we cure for use as instruments or vessels to contain activities. We grow and eat fruits and vegetables from our gardens, including taro, sweet potato, sugar cane, breadfruit, the more European things like tomatoes, broccoli and kale, and the more Asian things like bok choi, edamame and sesame. This work helps children understand where their food comes from and also helps develop positive attitudes toward healthy eating habits.

We grow flowers for lei around our peace garden, and flowers for butterflies in our butterfly garden. We also have a hale to use as a more focused gathering place for small groups. Our front yard is particularly designed to help us connect to our sense of place here in Hawaii, and our responsibility for our place. We use native plants when we can find them, and are currently using the palm leaves from the playground to thatch our hale roof. We get to demonstrate the need for sustainable practices and the resources available to the child, and to challenge them to embrace a larger world.

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What It Looks Like By Age

Age 2 to 3

All children are able to access and use every part of the front yard, though it does require a bit more guidance at this age level. This age level has a separate playground, but each element in the larger playground is found in the younger playground (except the models of the stream and lo’i). Children have access to edible plants, smelling and non-smelling flowers, and useful plants such as Hawaiian Cotton. There is a multi-textured trike path, a wild jungle area, and tables for more focused work. There is also a stage for dramatic play and large, full-body musical instruments. Materials continue to be moved in and out to create varied opportunities for exploration.

Age 3 to 4

The larger playground is set up for mixed age groups. These younger children tend to spend more time looking down, so chalk and washable paints are usually available. We also add colored water or soap bubbles in a section away from the taller rock water table in the corner. Trikes and bikes with smaller seats are available, and a small table is positioned at the bottom of the playground for seated activities.

Age 4 to 5

These older children tend to explore things that are up, so the climbing structure is high and things are sometimes found in the trees to challenge problem solving. Children are also encouraged to climb the papaya trees to collect fruit. Higher seated balance bikes are provided, as well as larger and heavier items in the loose-parts area. These older children also enjoy being challenged in almost every way, so materials such as target games and small Legos are rotated out and around regularly. We also block off a section behind the swings for practice with flying objects, like beanbags or baseballs.

Mixed Age

As already stated, the outdoor areas at our main campus have been designed specifically to handle mixed age groups. Our satellite classes, located at various public schools, had a different challenge because things like gardens are generally off limits to children in public schools. We therefore negotiated to fence off areas in the public schools to support our outdoor classroom concept. Each location is very unique, but each includes the elements we find are important. Children are able to interact directly with nature through gardens that stimulate as many senses as possible. Children are challenged with gross motor and fine motor play, and this usually includes something challenging to climb, bikes or trikes to ride across varying textures, a sandbox, and a water table. Plants are grown for food and for use as tools or art material or other useful purposes. Tables are available for seated work. Indoor activities are often brought outdoors (and vice versa), and materials are rotated through the environment to afford a variety of experiences.

Suggested Reading

• Nature Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul by Rusty Keeler

• Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv