

# Nature-Based Early Childhood

## Program Assessment & Guidebook

Anna Dutke • Heidi Faris • Jenny Hanlon

Megan Gessler • Sarah Sheldon • Laura Whittaker • Sheila Williams Ridge



# About this tool

The Nature-Based Early Childhood Program Assessment and Guidebook was developed to provide families, programs, and educators with a tool to assist them in evaluating how a program integrates nature into its philosophy and policies, family engagement and community connections, and the outdoor and indoor classroom environments and practices.

The assessment tool provides an opportunity to assess where a program falls on a continuum of measurable benchmarks intended to gauge nature integration within the four areas of practice. Information gathered can be utilized for reflection and discussions about a program's current practices and identifying areas of growth based on the individual program's goals for nature-based learning.

The guidebook also provides background information on each area and benchmark, along with examples from different early childhood programs to inspire and demonstrate the implementation of nature-based learning. This information can support programs and educators as they're working to continue to improve their practices and intentionality on how nature is integrated into areas of their program.

## ASSESSMENT TOOL: HOW TO USE

This tool was designed to be used as a self-assessment rating. When possible, it should be completed by at least three staff members or colleagues. For programs with multiple sites, it is recommended

to have each program site be rated separately. If there are different programs within a site, then the

different programs should be rated as separate sites. At least 75% of the classrooms per site should be included in the assessment. Once the three raters have completed the assessment, use the 3 scores to determine the average rating for each area to get the overall rating for the program. It is beneficial to utilize staff in different positions to rate the program. This approach will help assess the shared understanding of how nature is integrated into the areas.

**PROGRAM AREAS:** All the benchmark measures are organized into four areas.

- Program Philosophy and Policies
- Family Engagement and Community Connections
- Outdoor Environments and Practices
- Indoor Environment and Practices

**BENCHMARKS:** These are specific components that can be measured.

**RATING CATEGORIES:** Under each program area there are 3 categories under which the benchmarks are rated: caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly.

It's important to note that not all programs have control over their physical learning environments. For example, not all programs will have the option to have windows in their classrooms. Even if a program may rate low in one category, it may still have an average rating of a Chrysalis or Butterfly. Being able to understand and articulate the strengths of the program and why some areas may be lower than others is useful, especially when marketing a program and setting goals for future growth.

## Program Philosophy and Policies

1. The program embeds nature-based experiences within the program's philosophy and practices.
2. The program provides educators with ongoing nature-based professional development.
3. The program has written policies and procedures that support nature-based learning.

## Family Engagement and Community Connections

4. There is respect and ongoing communication with families regarding nature-based learning and activities.
5. There are family engagement opportunities related to nature-based learning within the school and community.
6. The program fosters a sense of belonging and place in the community.

## Outdoor Environments and Practices

7. The program intentionally connects children in and with nature through the outdoor spaces they utilize.
8. The program intentionally connects children in and with nature through the outdoor experiences they provide.
9. The program intentionally connects children in and with nature through the materials they provide.

## Indoor Environment and Practices

10. The program incorporates natural components in the indoor environment.
11. There are connections to the outdoor environment and curriculum in the indoor environment and curriculum.
12. The indoor environment reflects children's interests and voices.

## THE RATING

There are 3 rating categories for a program depending on how they are integrating nature.



**CATERPILLAR**  
**1 POINT**



**CHRYSALIS**  
**3 POINTS**



**BUTTERFLY**  
**5 POINTS**

For each rating, there are two transition scores that fall in between the three primary categories. In some instances, a program may find itself in between two ratings, meaning they have demonstrated all of the components for the lower rating (i.e. Caterpillar) and some, but not all of the components to meet the criteria for the higher rating (i.e. Chrysalis). In this case, the program can score itself as being in between the two categories, giving itself either 2 or 4 points depending on which two categories they are in between.

No matter where a program is rated, all ratings are considered positive as it demonstrates a program is actively incorporating nature-based learning opportunities for its students. This tool is helpful for ensuring a consistent understanding of program practices across staff helping programs identify areas for growth and improvement.

Raters are encouraged to make a note of specific evidence or practices that influenced their rating decision. This will support the reflection and discussion process with the other raters if discrepancies arise. This also reveals key practices that may be helpful to highlight when sharing information about the program with family and community members.

Large discrepancies between raters for an area or single measure is often a sign of misunderstanding or lack of shared knowledge about that area or measure. Many programs in the pilot study identified these areas and measures as being focus items for future staff meetings and professional development.

## HOW TO RATE IF NOT APPLICABLE

Programs should omit scoring areas or benchmarks that do not apply to their program. They will reduce the number of measures when analyzing the results. A program should not avoid rating itself on a benchmark simply because they aren't implementing that particular measure yet.

**EXAMPLE:** If a family childcare provider works alone, they would skip 2.4 when scoring the Policies and Procedures section.

### NOTE ABOUT INDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

In the event, a program only utilizes the indoor environment for inclement weather or non-instructional purposes (i.e. meals, rest time, using the bathroom, etc.), they may skip rating this area.

For details on how to use the rating sheets and analyze the results, see the Rating Summary on page 148.