Why Are Children Playing?
For the young child, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Happens on the Playground?
The playground is much more than just a place outdoors where children go for recess. Young children use tricycles, wheel toys, play structures, play accessories such as balls, and other outdoor activity equipment to engage in active play on the playground. When there is a good balance between vigorous play and quieter activities, children are generally more relaxed and ready to profit from their entire school experience.

What Are Children Learning?
Young children need opportunities to develop their bodies and coordination by running, jumping, climbing, lifting, pushing, and pulling. Physiological readiness precedes other learning. The playground is a natural place for physical development.

Young children need challenging playground experiences to develop early self-confidence. Along with developing large-muscle and coordination skills, children feel positive about themselves when they master pedaling a trike, catching a ball, or hopping on one foot.

Outdoor physical play is good for social as well as emotional development. Children learn to set up play scenarios and to follow rules and directions when they play together on the playground. They build friendships, learn to win and lose gracefully, and learn to share and take turns as they play. Frustrations and stresses are released through active physical play.

Moreover, the playground is about much more than just physical and social activity. The playground provides a curriculum activity center just as important as any other learning center in the classroom. Curriculum activities both robust and quiet can benefit from going outside. Music, dramatic play, art, and science just naturally gravitate to the great outdoors.

In addition, perceptions of the natural world are enhanced as children are given an opportunity to experience it first hand. The playground is an
age-appropriate science lab for young children. They can hypothesize and draw conclusions about the wind as they watch clouds move and tree leaves dance in the breeze. Familiar small animals like insects, birds, and squirrels may be observed in their natural habitats. The passage of seasons can be felt in the temperature of the air and seen in the changes of plants and animals.

Oral language skills grow naturally when children play together freely. Children learn how to communicate with others while discussing and describing things they see or while setting up rules to play games. They get opportunities to experience the rhythm and rhyme of language when they play circle or activity games such as “Red Rover” or “The Farmer in the Dell.”

What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?

• Make certain that children have a safe environment for outdoor play. Sturdy fences protect children and define the play area. The ground needs to have appropriate cover for the types of play equipment available. Equipment for climbing, swinging, and other active play requires a cushioned ground cover. Riding toys are best on a smooth surface. An area with grass, trees, and plants makes an inviting play yard and provides experiences with nature. If it is possible to have, a covered area will allow children access to outdoor play during rainy times.

• Provide a variety of types of active play equipment. Balls of differing sizes and textures, beanbags, and other toss toys vary throwing and catching experiences. Push and/or pedal trikes and ride-ons that are size-appropriate for the children using them encourage gross motor development. (Helmets protect children and reinforce safety concepts.) Wagons and wheelbarrows to push and pull develop other muscles and skills. Ride-on vehicles, large traffic signs, traffic cones, and other accessories enhance outdoor active pretend play.

• Outdoor storage allows playground toys to be safely stored when not in use, and is convenient for rotating the toys in and out of play. Take parachutes, crawling tunnels, scarves, and other movement materials outside when appropriate to expand the play. Have choices of activities available for outside times. The playground should be a fun space for children to play freely.

• Encourage pretend play outside. Large plastic blocks, cars, and trucks will bring block play to the playground. A weatherproof playhouse, plastic table, blocks, and chairs along with dishes, gardening tools, and other weather-resistant play props let housekeeping play move outdoors.

• Bring art outside. Outdoor easels, and indoor/outdoor supply carts or totes make this easy to do. Even without special equipment children can paint with water on sidewalks, use chalk and paper to do nature rubbings, fingerpaint on paper placed on large pieces of cardboard on the ground, or glue found objects onto collage trays. Almost any media that can be used inside can move outside with a little planning.

• All the sensory learning that happens at sand and water play can be available outside. Provide an outdoor sensory table or some sturdy tubs along with different
types of sand and water toys. Sand and water tables that remain outside need to have covers on them when not in use to protect them from animals. In hot weather let the children play with a hose or sprinkler to learn how rainbows happen, or encourage them to dig in the dirt to plant seeds.

- Help children plant a garden or some containers with vegetables or other child-safe plants for them to tend to. There is no better way to learn the life-cycle of plants as well as to observe the science of the seasons than through first-hand experiences.

- Talk with children on the playground. Ask questions that help young children to become observant and to learn to ask their own questions about the natural world. Lie on your backs together and track the clouds: “Look at that cloud. I wonder why it is over there now. Why do you think it moved?” Invite children to see connections and draw conclusions: “I wonder why the squirrels are all around our oak tree now. What do you think?”

- Get active, move around, join in outdoor games with the children, and understand that real learning is happening here on the playground. To enhance children’s learning, adults should be participants and not just “safety guards.” Keep outdoor games simple and age-appropriate. Young children are not ready for organized sports.

- Adults who understand and help young children meet the need they have for daily robust play and time outside year round are supporting the emotional and physical growth of the children in their care.