

Gardening with Children ...and Physical Distancing

Kids need a good 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Outdoor gatherings are less risky than indoors ones since COVID-19 spreads more easily when people are close together in confined spaces. It allows children to spread out and physically distance themselves from each other. Being outside creating a garden space and caring for the plants can be physical as well as developmental. Aside from the benefits of being outdoors and having fun digging around in dirt, gardening contributes to children's skill development. Fine motor and sensory skills are built into just about every type of gardening activity. Planting, watering, and harvesting engage all the senses. Learning what makes dirt and soil healthy for fruits and vegetables encourages an appreciation for the environment. Harvesting items from the garden to make a salad for lunch - freshly picked lettuce, green beans, carrots - gives kids a sense of accomplishment and may inspire them to eat new foods.

The reality right now is that children will need to practice social distancing – creating physical space among themselves while they engage together in all of the activities that make gardening such a pleasurable and satisfying time for children. Below are a few tips when planning gardening activities with children in child care, early learning programs and school age care. Per previous guidance, children in group care settings should be in stable groups of no more than 10 children and adults combined.



- Groups should be brought out to the garden one group at a time unless the garden space is large enough to allow a space of 6' between different groups. Children and staff from different groups should not mix.
- Children should be given their own garden space that is 3' to 6' away from another child's space.
- Younger children need more supervision, so smaller group sizes are recommended (e.g. 4-6 children is optimal).

Provide a designated area of dirt or ground for each child to be able to engage in the activity independently. Individual pots of dirt could also be used with the pots spaced 3-6 feet apart.

- Each child has their own spade or spoon for digging up grass or weeds.
- Gardening tools should not be shared and need to be washed and disinfected before another child uses them.
- Each child gets their own set of seeds or seedlings to plant in the space.
- Adults demonstrate what to do first.
- Instructions are given to plant only in the specified area. Areas can be drawn in the dirt or marked with small stones or sticks.
- More than one child can plant items in an area, just not at the same time.



If staffing permits, designate teams and plan a few different activities that each team does at different times. This helps to keep group sizes small and keeps children busy so they aren't waiting around.

Team ideas might include:

- Finding the garden spot: Walking the yard and observing where the sun is shining and where it's shady. This can be done at different times of the day.
- Mixing the dirt: Provide bags of soil, peat moss, compost and have children mix them in the suitable portions and then deposit them in the garden area. Planting seeds in egg cartons is helpful for children to plant one or two seeds in small space.
- Digging the dirt and preparing the garden bed: create a perimeter where the garden will be and remove grass, small stones, and weeds using child sized digging implements.



The University of Illinois provides [a handy guide to gardening for kids](#) – including ideas for selecting a suitable garden spot, making the dirt healthy for plants; watering and feeding plants using organic materials and picking them to take back to the kitchen to wash and eat. All of these steps for creating a garden are suitable for adopting social distancing and allowing children to interact with one another and the Earth while keeping a safe physical distance.

A few other tips for safe gardening with children:

- Children and staff should wash hands before heading out to the garden and after they return.
- Use hand sanitizer if they touch each other or if they sneeze or cough while engaged in gardening activities. Have children brush off dirt first and then apply the sanitizer.
- Wash all garden goodies before eating. Never select items that have fallen to the ground.

Other resources for gardening and teaching children about how foods grow:

- [Harvest for Healthy Kids](#) – Songs, recipes, newsletter ideas and kids gardening activities revolve around 12 different fruits and vegetables.
- [KidsGardening.org](#) Lesson Plans - allows filtering lessons/activities by age.
- [Down to Earth Gardens](#) A local resource - Get free seed packets, raised beds and gardening with kids consultation. 425.350.2658 and Email: tmyer58@hotmail.com



Child Care Health Outreach Program
3020 Rucker Avenue, Suite 104
Everett, WA 98201-3900
childcarehealth@snohd.org, 425.252-5415
<https://www.snohd.org/Child-Care-Providers>