



Early Childhood Health Outdoors 2023 Impact Report

An initiative of the National Wildlife Federation, ECHO is transforming how young children play and learn outdoors, for the benefit of our kids, our communities, and our planet. Here's how we fulfilled that mission in 2023:

"We created a sensory garden, featuring aromatic plants, such as chamomile, lemon balm, sage, and thyme. This area has become a sensory haven, allowing our children to engage their senses of touch and smell. The tactile exploration of different textures and scents has enhanced their sensory development and provided a unique and calming outdoor experience."
– Kelly, 2023 ECHO Cohort Participant

Design Assistance

Our team of landscape architects and designers collaborates with partners to co-create vibrant, dynamic outdoor play and learning environments that support healthy child development and provide opportunities for young children to connect to nature.

We provided design or technical assistance to **enhance 63 spaces where young children spend time**, including early childhood education centers and homes, places of worship, public parks, wildlife refuges, and more. ECHO collaborated with partners on projects in Colorado, Michigan, New Mexico, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington, D.C.



David Lynn Photography

Education & Engagement

Our early childhood education specialists provide training, professional development, and technical assistance to ensure caregivers, families, and educators are empowered to engage young children outdoors.

We conducted 17 public trainings on outdoor play and learning, reaching **423 participants** and **305 programs** serving over **19,000 young children**.

In 2023, 64 early childhood educators, informal caregivers, coaches, and administrators took part in grant-funded professional learning cohorts to advance their skills and knowledge in outdoor learning – **creating strong, local communities of practice**.

ECHO designed a resource specifically for early learning locations affected by extreme heat and collaborated with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to develop an **off-site play guide**.

The ECHO team collaborated with Texas Tech University to create **interactive virtual tours** of high-quality outdoor learning environments as a teaching tool for early childhood educators, designers, and regulators.

We took the ECHO Summit on the road and hosted events in rural and urban Colorado settings to bring early childhood educators and caregivers together to learn from programs who have embarked on the nature-based outdoor learning journey.

To advance our Nearby Nature initiative in Littleton, Colorado, we hosted several community engagement activities including a **“Designer for a Day”** camp, where children worked with the ECHO team to envision a future nature play space at the Littleton Museum. We provided design assistance and a professional development series for The Village ECE, one of the largest child care centers in Littleton. This work led to a **partnership with a local high school**, whose students helped develop planting plans and installed a native pollinator garden in the playground space.

Capacity Building & Systems Change

We raise funding and resources to expand our capacity and support our growing networks. We engage in local, state, and national policy opportunities with early childhood leaders, and we advocate for early outdoor learning through a network of local ECHO champions and National Wildlife Federation’s National Advocacy Center.

Out of 218 grantees, ECHO was awarded one of the largest grants from the **Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity** (CIRCLE) grant program in Colorado. We used the funding to advance the capacity of the state’s early childhood field through training, resources, design services, technical assistance, and network-building.

ECHO and North Carolina State University’s Natural Learning Initiative were invited to join **Grow Outdoors South Carolina** – a unique, five-year collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Social Services Division of Early Care and Education and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control to create naturalized outdoor play and learning spaces in early childhood education programs across the state.

Our team sponsored or presented at 9 local, state, and national conferences, providing sessions on affordable play settings, engaging infants and toddlers outdoors, best practice in outdoor learning environments, and more.

Advancing Equity & Accessibility

We focus intentionally on reaching young children who may not otherwise have access to high-quality outdoor settings; children in families living with low-incomes and low wealth; and children in BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) who often face multiple barriers to healthy outdoor experiences.

We hosted several webinars and presentations in Spanish, including at the National Association for the Education of Young Children annual conference.

In alignment with the priorities of the National Wildlife Federation, ECHO developed our first **Environmental Justice Action Plan**, which includes, among other priorities:

- Advancing environmental justice through both engaging communities in **authentic collaborative processes** and addressing barriers to meaningful and impactful outcomes.
- Leveraging opportunities to simultaneously **advance health equity and environmental resilience** by increasing our focus on implementing context-sensitive, **sustainable landscape design solutions** in settings for young children.
- Demonstrating ECHO as an environmental justice strategy by highlighting the ecological benefits associated with greening children’s everyday environments.