

Sunny Chinese Learning Center
1025 The Dalles Ave.
Sunnyvale, CA 94087

Shétal Divatia
Planning Department
City of Sunnyvale
sdivatia@sunnyvale.ca.gov

Via: Email

January 23, 2019

Re: Revised Project Description for Sunny Chinese Learning Center Use Permit Application - 1025 The Dalles, St Luke Lutheran Church of Sunnyvale

Dear Ms. Divatia:

Following our use permit hearing on October 10, 2018 and our meetings with the neighbors on November 17th and January 16th regarding our above-referenced application, we have heard the concerns of our neighbors and we have revised our proposal accordingly to address them. In short, we propose to further restrict our hours of operation and time periods for outdoor play and will require that our teachers monitor and enforce outdoor noise levels so they do not exceed city noise standards.

Below is a chart summarizing our existing approved use in the far left-hand column, our previously proposed changes to that use in the middle column that was considered at the October 10th public hearing, and our revised proposal attempting to address your concerns in the far right hand column. Note that in this revised proposal, we are requesting that condition BP-5 of our original 2012 use permit to plant a screening hedge at the north property line be eliminated, and that this change was supported by the neighbors we met with.

We request that these changes to our project description to address our neighbors' concerns be summarized in your staff report to the Planning Commission and that the project as revised, be considered and acted on by the Planning Commission at the appeal hearing scheduled for March 11, 2019. To date, our revised proposal has support from three surrounding neighbors as evidenced in the emails and letters we have forwarded to you. While we reached out to the one neighbor that objected to our proposal at the Zoning Administrator hearing, they unfortunately have not responded to our efforts to meet with them.

	Existing Allowed Use per 2012 Use Permit	Previous Proposal Considered 10/2018	Current Revised Proposal
Hours of operation	3:30pm – 7:00pm M-F	11:30am -6:30pm M-F when school is in session 8:30am -6:30pm during school holidays and breaks	<p>The center will closed on President's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving Day and the week between Christmas and New Year's Day and the week of July 4th.</p> <p>Center hours when the Sunnyvale and Cupertino School Districts are in session is after students are released from school per the Districts' bell schedules. Currently the center hours when school is in session are as follows*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M/W/Th: 2:25pm -6:30pm • Tues: 1:45pm -6:30pm • Friday: 1:00pm – 6:30pm <p>*Note that should the Districts' bell schedules change, the above hours shall be adjusted accordingly to accommodate District students after school.</p> <p>Exceptions to above hours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During first 6 weeks of school year a maximum of 25 kindergartners will arrive at 11:55am M-F • On early dismissal days (typically one per month) students will arrive at 11:55am <p>School breaks (including non-major holidays and summer break):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M-F 8:30am -6:30pm • Morning enrollment limited to 50 students
Outdoor activity	Not allowed	Allow outdoor activity in four 30-minute periods for a total of 2 hours per day.	Same restrictions as previously proposed except that all outdoor activity periods (30-minutes each) may only occur between 3:30-5:00pm in the fenced area. During

	Existing Allowed Use per 2012 Use Permit	Previous Proposal Considered 10/2018	Current Revised Proposal
Outdoor activity - continuted		Each 30-minute period will have a maximum of 24 children supervised by at least one teacher. (12 kids in each group with 2 groups at a time)	summer break (only), outdoor play will also be allowed between 10:30am-11:30am. Children will not be allowed to play outdoors after they are picked up by their parents. Teachers will strictly enforce this requirement.
Noise mitigation	Prohibition on outdoor use (see above)	8 ft. high masonry wall at north of church property bordering six single family homes, as recommended by staff Limit outdoor play only to the fenced in 2,875 sf area Plant 6-foot tall hedge at north property line	Same restrictions as previously proposed except: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • additional outdoor time restrictions stated above; • no masonry wall which neighbors opposed; • a noise level monitor will be placed in the play area so teachers can ensure noise does not exceed city noise standards either by quieting children down or bringing them inside; and • no hedge will planted at the north property line (per condition BP-5 of our original 2012 use permit)

We look forward to presenting our revised proposal to the Planning Commission at the appeal hearing. Should you have any questions or concerns in the meantime, please contact me at 408-598-7060 or lucyliu12@yahoo.com.

Sincerely,



Lucy Liu

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March 1, 2019

Planning Commission Members
City of Sunnyvale
c/o Shétal Divatia, Project Planner

Via: Email

Re: **File # 2018-7519 -- Sunny Chinese Learning Center Use Permit Application -
1025 The Dalles, St Luke Lutheran Church of Sunnyvale (APN 320-11-010)**

Dear Planning Commission Members:

This law firm represents the Sunny Chinese Learning Center ("Learning Center") in its appeal of the Zoning Administrator's October 12, 2018 denial of the Learning Center's application to modify its current Use Permit (File #2012-7479) to expand its hours of operation and allow for outdoor play. We respectfully request that you grant our appeal at your March 11th meeting on the grounds that, as recommended in the staff report to the Zoning Administrator dated October 10, 2018, and as further explained below, the required findings of approval for the Use Permit modification can and should be made. This is even more evident in light of the recent changes my client has made to its application since filing its appeal to address certain neighbors' concerns.

A. Proposal Driven by Community Need -- Parents Need Extended Hours; Children Need Outdoor Play

The Learning Center has been located on the St. Luke Lutheran Church of Sunnyvale campus since August of 2012 when its Use Permit (2012-7479) was first approved. The Learning Center serves K-6th grade children of all racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds. As stated on its website, the Learning Center is "dedicated to provide a safe, supportive and enriched learning environment where students are challenged to acquire the knowledge, skills, and qualities for success now and in the future." It is "also committed to assure learning experiences that will

assist... students to achieve their greatest potential and creativity abilities, to adapt to their bi-cultural environment.” Curriculum includes, Chinese Language and Culture, Math Enrichment Practice, English Phonics, Reading, Writing, Chinese Chess / Chess Club, Homework Tutoring, Chinese Calligraphy, Chinese Drawing and Arts, Chinese Kong Fu, and Crafts, Songs, Music, Movement.

Conditions imposed on the Use Permit limited the hours of operation to 3:30-7:00PM on weekdays (AT-1) and required “all instruction and activity to occur indoors” (AT-7). The Learning Center is proposing that the hours be extended to accommodate needed care after school and during school holiday and breaks in accordance with the public school schedule, and to allow for limited periods of outdoor play that children require to develop.

The current hours of the Learning Center do not accommodate the public school bell schedule which includes minimum days and staff development days, and does not allow for care during school holidays and breaks. According to the enclosed data gathered by Santa Clara County Office of Education, child care is only available for 25% of school aged children that need child care in Santa Clara County, meaning that child care is unavailable for 75% of children that need it. These are staggering numbers which the Learning Center’s requested extended hours would help to address.

The Learning Center is currently required by its use permit to contain all instruction and activity indoors. However, experts agree that it is unhealthy to keep children indoors for extended periods of time. As explained in the enclosed article, outdoor play is critical to children’s growth and development. Yet opportunities for outdoor play are increasingly diminishing in a world that is becoming increasingly sedentary and disconnected from the outdoors. The Learning Center is proposing that outdoor play be allowed in the fenced area for limited 30-minute periods for no more than 24 children per period between the hours of 3:30-5:00pm, and during summer break, between 10:30-11:30am.

B. Only One of Two Findings Required for Approval

Pursuant to Section 19.88.050 of the City’s Zoning Ordinance, approval of the Learning Center’s requested Use Permit application requires only one of the following two findings of approval -- that the permit will either:

1. Attain the objectives and purposes of the general plan, specific plan, precise plan, or other specialized plan of the city of Sunnyvale; or

2. Ensure that the general appearance of proposed structures, or the uses to be made of the property to which the application refers, will not impair either the orderly development of, or the existing uses being made of, adjacent properties.

C. Both Findings of Approval are Met

As concluded in the staff report to the Zoning Administrator, the proposed Use Permit meets both of the above findings:

1. Finding 1: Project Attains the Purposes and Objectives of the General Plan

The permit will attain all of the following 10 General Plan purposes, objectives and policies, only the last of which is mentioned in the staff report to the Zoning Administrator, and none of which are addressed in the Action Letter issued by the Zoning Administrator (emphasis added):

- a. *Land Use and Transportation Guiding Principle- Special and Unique Land Uses:* Allow for land uses such as **child care**, nursing homes, and places of worship that complete the community fabric.
- b. *Land Use and Transportation Policy LT-6.4:* Allow compatible and supporting uses such as group homes, places of assembly, community centers, recreational centers, and **child-care centers** in residential neighborhoods (including single-family neighborhoods) subject to review and consideration of operations, traffic, parking, and architecture.
- c. *Land Use and Transportation Policy LT-14.12:* Recognize **child care** and places of assembly as essential services and land uses that support the diverse needs of the community. Avoid locating these sensitive uses near hazardous materials, noise, dust, etc.
- d. *Land Use and Transportation Policy LT-14.9:* Support the provision of a full spectrum of public and quasi-public services (e.g., parks, **day care**, group living, recreation centers, religious institutions, schools, hospitals, large medical clinics) that are appropriately located in residential, commercial, and industrial neighborhoods and ensure they do not have a negative effect on the surrounding area.
- e. *Land Use and Transportation Policy LT-14.10:* Encourage multiple uses of public and quasi-public facilities (e.g., religious institutions, schools, social organizations, **day care**), such as community events, **after-school programs**, and festivals.

- f. *Community Character Policy CC-10.2*: Provide **school-aged youth-oriented** recreation and **enrichment programs** and services during non-school hours. (Previously Open Space and Recreation Policy 2.2.B.2)
- g. *Community Character Policy CC-10.5*: Develop and implement programs in order to meet the developmental and social needs of specific targeted populations (e.g., **youth**, teens, seniors, disabled). (Previously Policy 2.2.B.5.)
- h. *Citywide Vision Goal V - Diverse Population*: To celebrate the **diversity** of the population and to provide equal opportunity for all residents to participate fully in community life
- i. *Citywide Vision Goal VII - Quality Education*: To support and work cooperatively with the educational institutions which serve Sunnyvale so as to provide the opportunity for a **quality education** for all youth, and life-long learning for all residents.
- j. *Land Use and Transportation Element Policy LT-5.2b*: Support a full spectrum of conveniently located commercial, public, and **quasi-public uses** that support and enhance the livability of residential neighborhoods.

2. Finding 2: The Project Ensures that the Use will not Impair the Orderly Development or Existing Uses of Adjacent Property

As stated in the staff report to the Zoning Administrator, “[t]he proposed use, as conditioned, is compatible with existing uses on-site and residential uses in the neighborhood.” As explained below, the Learning Center’s request to expand its hours and allow for limited outdoor play will not impair the orderly development or the existing uses of the adjacent property.

The Learning Center is an existing use that has operated at its current location for almost seven years now. It is located within an existing church campus with a multitude of other permitted uses occurring at any given time of day. The Learning Center is not requesting any increase in enrollment that would generate additional traffic or other impacts in the neighborhood.

Outdoor activities already occur on the campus by other tenants of the church including by Saint Luke Youth Program, Vacation Bible School, Amazing Creations Preschool, and the Boy Scouts. Therefore, permitting outdoor play by the Learning Center would not be introducing noise or a new use to the church campus that the adjacent residential neighborhood is not already accustomed to.

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Moreover, as documented by the noise study, the proposed extended hours and outdoor play will “meet the City noise ordinance limitations and would not produce any significant noise disturbance in the vicinity of the site.” The “highest backyard noise levels from kids play would be in the range of 45 to 48 dBA, significantly below the 60 dBA City daytime noise limits, and would not be noticeable with existing daytime noise levels...”

Furthermore, as explained below, in response to neighbors’ concerns, since filing its appeal the Learning Center has agreed to further restrict its originally proposed extended hours and outdoor play times. This revised proposal is supported by adjacent neighbors of the project. Therefore, the ability to make this second finding of approval is even more undeniable.

D. Zoning Administrator’s Denial Was Improper Because it Failed to Address Either Finding of Approval

The Zoning Administrator failed to address either of the above two findings (only one of which is required for approval) or explain why these findings could not be met. Instead, the Zoning Administrator based her decision on the fact that the Center had already begun to operate with extended hours and outdoor play, in contradiction to the terms of the original use permit. This is not a valid basis for denial as it is unrelated to either of the required conditions of approval. As such, the Zoning Administrator did not make the required findings to deny the permit. Even if proper denial findings had been made, as explained above, the evidence in the record would not have supported them.

A. Modifications Addressing Neighbor Concerns Further Supports Finding of Approval

Following the use permit hearing on October 10, 2018, my client reached out to and met with surrounding neighbors on November 17th and January 16th. The Learning Center heard the concerns of its neighbors expressed at these meetings and has revised its proposal accordingly to address them. In short, they propose to further restrict the hours of operation and the time periods for outdoor play and will require that its teachers monitor and enforce outdoor noise levels so they do not exceed City noise standards. These changes are explained in detail in the letter to Shétal Divatia dated January 23rd, 2019 (which should be included in your packet). To date, the revised proposal has support from three surrounding neighbors as evidenced in the

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emails and letters that also should be included in your packet.¹ This is further evidence that finding of approval no. 1 can and should be made.

For the foregoing reasons, we respectfully request that you grant the Learning Center's appeal and approve its Use Permit modification application.

Very truly yours,



CAMAS J. STEINMETZ

¹ While my client made repeated efforts to reach out to the one neighbor that objected to our proposal at the Zoning Administrator hearing, this neighbor unfortunately has not responded to my client's efforts to meet with them.

JUNE 2018



SANTA CLARA COUNTY 2018 CHILD CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT



SUPPLEMENTAL

HIGHLIGHTS

- Three-quarters or more of school-aged children and infants/toddlers in Santa Clara County are in need of yet without full-time child care
- Countywide, there are 14,000 more slots available to children ages 3-4 years with working parents than there are children who require care
- Licensed and license-exempt center-based providers in Santa Clara County have the capacity to serve 42% of children ages 0-12 years that require child care
- Unmet need for infant/toddler care exists in every major city in Santa Clara County, from 47 children in Alviso to over 20,000 children in San Jose
- Gilroy, Morgan Hill, and San Martin are the only major cities in Santa Clara County where the number of children who require care is greater than the number of child care slots

UNMET NEED FOR FULL-TIME CARE AMONG CHILDREN IN WORKING FAMILIES BY AGE GROUP

A more detailed summary of the data used to calculate unmet need for full-time care among children with both parents in the workforce is provided in Table 29. Combined, there are enough child care slots to meet the need for 42% of children ages 0-12 years in Santa Clara County. Over 80% of children ages 0-2 years with one (for single-parent families) or both (for two-parent families) parents in the workforce are in need of full-time child care.

TABLE 29. SUMMARY OF DEMAND, SUPPLY AND UNMET NEED FOR FULL-TIME CARE AMONG CHILDREN IN WORKING FAMILIES (2016/17)

Age Group	Demand		Supply (No. of Slots)				Need	
	No. of Children	No. in Working Families	Licensed Centers	FCCHs	LECs	Total	Surplus or Shortage	Pct. of Need Met
0-2 Years	71,454	39,287	3,656	3,472	280	7,408	-31,879	19%
3 & 4 Years	50,302	29,566	36,989	6,304	485	43,778	+14,212	148%
5-12 Years	192,306	128,887	10,020	4,344	17,605	31,969	-96,918	25%
Total	314,062	197,740	50,665	14,120	18,370	83,155	-114,585	42%

Notes: Counts under supply reflect desired capacity of licensed centers, family child care homes, and license-exempt centers. Additional details on these data are provided in the previous sections.

Sources: **Demand** – American Institutes for Research, 2016; **Supply** – Community Child Care Council of Santa Clara County, December 31, 2017



Rostrum

The importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy development

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ABSTRACT

Changes in current societies are affecting childhood experiences. Time for outdoor play is diminishing, contributing to more sedentary lifestyles, disconnected from the natural world. Recognizing the importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy growth, a project focused on the exploration of the outdoor environment was developed with a group of young children in an early childhood education setting in Portugal. The project aimed to transform educational practices, moving from frequent indoor activities to a regular use of the outdoor environment. In this paper, we present the main dimensions related to outdoor play that emerged during the project (contact with natural elements, importance of risk, socialization opportunities) and highlight the role of professionals and families in creating quality outdoor play opportunities.

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Introduction

The importance of play for children's healthy development is grounded in a strong body of research.^{1–3} As a natural and compelling activity, play promotes cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being, offering the necessary conditions for children to thrive and learn. Through play, the child can experiment, solve problems, think creatively, cooperate with others, etc., gaining a deeper knowledge about his/herself and the world. From an early age, the possibility to experience several opportunities for unstructured play, in which the child can decide what to do, with whom and how, promotes positive self-esteem, autonomy, and confidence.

Acknowledging the influence of time and space in play experiences, in this article we address the special contribution of the outdoor environment to fulfil children's needs for free play, reporting into an outdoor educational project developed with a group of 14 children, between 15 and 36 months old, in a Portuguese early childhood setting. The work presented aims to identify important dimensions of outdoor play that contribute to effective learning and healthy development, and highlight the role of professionals

and families in the provision of such experiences in early childhood education settings.

Outdoor play in current society and education settings

The specific features and stimulus of the outdoor environment provide for different play opportunities that can hardly be replicated inside.⁴ The outdoors can be described as an open and constantly changing environment, where it is possible to experience freedom, gross and boisterous movements, and contact with natural elements.⁵ While playing outside, children benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural elements, and open air, which contributes to bones development, stronger immune system and physical activity.^{6,7} The need to be physically active from an early age is particularly relevant if we consider the concerning growth of children's obesity and overweight. According to the World Health Organization,^{8,9} Portugal is the second European country with the highest values of overweight among children with 11 years old (32%), being preceded by Greece (33%) and proceeded by Ireland (30%). Also, play in green outdoor environments promotes higher levels of attention and well-being.^{10–12}

However, the growing evidences about the importance of outdoor play does not seem to have an impact in the type of experiences that children have access to. Contrary to what would be expected, opportunities for outdoor play are diminishing, in consequence of globalization, technology expansion and urban growth.¹³

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A growing culture of fear about the possible accidents that might happen affect parent's and professionals attitude towards outdoor play, so children tend to be kept inside, occupied with structured activities, and controlled by adults.^{3,14,15} Possible hazards, interactions with strangers and car traffic are the most frequent factors mentioned by parents for not letting their children play outside, even though they acknowledge the importance of such experiences.^{13,16} According to Gill,¹⁴ these fears are often brought by misinterpretations of reality, without having a real expression in society. For example, the fear about child's abduction is not linked to an increase in these type of crimes, although a greater emphasis is given to these situations by social media.

Adding to this, there is a concern to occupy children during the day, considering that most parents work long hours and want to guarantee the best opportunities for children to acquire different skills and knowledge. Academic activities and sports often occupy children's time to play freely. Going from one activity to another, children tend to be transported by car, without experiencing the outdoor environment through the interaction with the community.^{17,18}

In this scenario, there is a need to raise general awareness regarding children's right to play outdoors, as well as its potential in supporting children's well-being, learning and development. Acknowledging the time children spend in educational settings, concerns about the time and space to play outside should be integrated in education planning and intervention, starting in day-care and kindergarten. In Portugal, research shows that early childhood education is too centred in what happens inside the activity room, wrongly considering that the outdoor environment serves merely as recess time, during which children can stretch their legs and expend their energy.^{19–23} A recent study focused on the use of outdoor spaces in four Portuguese kindergartens showed that the number of times children go outside is very reduced, especially in the winter months. Children tend to spend long periods in closed environments, more exposed to disease contamination and saturated air.²⁴ Also, the time spent outside was often insufficient, varying between 16 and 30 min. This is a very short period for children to take advantage of the benefits related to outdoor play, being recommended a minimum of 40 min, per day.⁷

The outdoor education project

With the desire of offering a different educational response to young children and acknowledging the importance of the outdoors for learning and development, a Portuguese early childhood a Portuguese early childhood centre took the initiative of implementing an innovative outdoor education project, going against the tendency of keeping children inside. During a period of three years, the setting located in a rural area in the centre of Portugal, catering for children from 4 months to 10 years of age (from 6 to 10 years old children attend an after school service), introduced gradual changes in pedagogical practices, in order to create quality outdoor play opportunities for children.

Despite having a large and well equipped outdoor area, with natural elements and different type of structures to promote play, in the beginning of the project the children did not use the outdoors regularly. The professionals perceived the indoor environment has being more secure and comfortable, so they avoided going outside for long periods. They were also afraid about possible accidents or diseases that might affected children, fearing for negative reactions from the families.

To overcome these obstacles, a methodology close to action-research was adopted to facilitate practices' transformation, which included teachers' training in outdoor play, regular team meetings and observations of children's play. In this way, problems that

emerged were interpreted as mile stones in the process of improving educational practice and specific strategies were experimented to achieve a solution.

This outdoor project directly involved all the early childhood teachers of the institution (5 women) and, indirectly, the board of the setting, other professionals, families, community members and, of course, the children. In this paper, the experience of one of the groups, with 14 children between 15 and 36 months old will be shared.

Through qualitative data collection techniques, such as observations, written records, videos and photographs focused on children's outdoor play, three dimensions were identified as key to promote learning and development: contact with natural elements; importance of risk; socialization opportunities. The analysis of each dimension will take in consideration current international literature. Also, these three components of outdoor play can only be fully developed if children are accompanied by attentive and responsive adults, concerned with their needs and interests.^{25,26} The role of professionals and families in this project is also presented, considering that cooperation between adults is an important aspect for the success of outdoor play experiences.

Promoting learning and development outside

Contact with natural elements

The outdoor environment offers unique stimulus that capture children's attention and interest. Sticks, rocks, flowers, soil, water, etc., are explored with curiosity and drive to learn, as they offer countless possibilities for play. As White²⁷ states, natural elements are open-ended materials, that can respond to children's imagination and needs. In this process of reinvention and assigning new meaning to objects (e.g. a stick can be a gun, a boat or a pen), it is possible to mobilize skills related to divergent thinking, creativity, problem solving, among others. The use of natural elements in children's play also creates a more sustainable strategy in what concerns resources provision. Natural elements are easy to find, cheap and they do not offer the limited options that commercial toys do.²⁸

The exploration of natural elements is also important to capture children's attention to the richness and diversity of Nature. The sense of discovery and fascination influences meaningful learning and allows for the development of an emotional connection towards the environment. If we assume that attitudes of respect and care are more likely to emerge regarding something that is dear to us, than it is crucial to promote a sense of belonging and familiarity towards Nature from an early age to facilitate ecological and sustainable behaviours along life.

Through outdoor play and the exploration of natural elements, it is possible to promote education in its broadest sense. Activities related to playing with soil and water can serve as examples of learning opportunities in which concepts related to mathematics, science or language were promoted in an integrated way. As children filled and emptied containers, several times, they could explore notions related to weight, volume and time, and as they talked about what they were experiencing, new vocabulary was being acquired. Similar findings were found in other researches, showing, for example, children's ability to learn and employ mathematical products and procedures during outdoor play, using their body as a learning tool.^{29,30}

It what concerns health, the interaction with natural elements such as the soil helps build immunity. Growing research has been showing the importance of experiences that promote the contact with "harmless microbes", that provide protection against diseases.³¹ Among the group we worked with, some children had respiratory and skin problems (e.g. asthma and eczemas), and going

outside often helped them deal with periods of aggravated symptoms.

Importance of risk

Today's society often neglects the importance of risk for children's learning and development. A culture of fear lead us to underestimate what children are capable to do, creating an even more "dangerous" learning environment, where children do not have the possibility to learn, by experience, how to stay safe.^{14,32} It is essential to adopt a wider vision of risk, going beyond the possibility of accidents to consider the positive implications related to the feelings of success and happiness when a challenge or a new skill is mastered.^{33,34}

In the outdoor environment, opportunities to exceed personal limits often emerge in situations like climbing up a tree or using a tool. In risky play, the adult should interpret the signs of the child, giving the necessary support or space that he or she needs. From our experience and following other studies in this area, it is possible to state that risky play promotes important skills related to persistence, entrepreneurship, self-knowledge and problem solving.^{35,36}

During outdoor play, children should have the opportunity to experiment moments of failure and success, learning by trial and error. If we try to prevent all risky situations, children will not know how to deal with unpredictable environments and will lack the necessary confidence to overcome challenges in an autonomous way. During the project, we had different situations in which risk emerge, for example when wild mushrooms appeared in the garden, after a period of rain, and children were interested by that phenomena. In that situation, we could either prohibit the exploration or help children understand what was happening in the safest way possible. Choosing the second option, we told the children that it was very dangerous to eat the mushrooms and we gave them some tools to facilitate observation (e.g. magnifying glass and clamps). We always remain close to them, helping, and answering to the questions that emerged. If we had avoid going out because of the mushrooms or if we had ignored that situation, an important learning opportunity would have been missed.

Socialization opportunities

The environment created outside can offer interesting conditions for children and adults to show different aspects of their personality, which normally do not emerge during the time indoors. Following the findings of Maynard, Waters and Clement,³⁷ we have realized that outdoor play allows for a deeper knowledge about children, facilitating a more adequate educational intervention from the adult. Likewise, less conflicts occur during outdoor play and children tend to cooperate more with each other.^{28,38} The characteristics of the space (open and unpredictable) enable the development of joint goals between children, leading to experiences of companionship among peers. During outdoor play, children become teachers and learners, sharing their knowledge and skills to accomplish different tasks or challenges. In this process of cooperation, it is possible to develop empathy, as children begin to understand other's people feelings and needs. The crucial difference about socialization in the outdoor environment is that opportunities for interaction happen in a gradual way, giving children the possibility to choose the moments to connect with others or to play individually, without having to continually run into each other as it so often happens in close and exiguous rooms.

The interaction with adults also seem to be facilitated in the outdoor area. In different moments along the project, adults recognized that they felt more available to support children outside, where they felt relaxed and calm. This statement suggests that the outdoor environment is not only a healthy environment for children, but also for adults, where the levels of stress and anxiety seem to diminish. Other studies found evidences that support different

models of interaction between adult and child during outdoor play, being more child-led, flexible and based on dialogue about children's discoveries and interests.^{4,39,40}

The role of professionals and families in the provision of outdoor play experiences

To develop quality outdoor practices, that can have a positive impact in children's health and development, it is fundamental to promote conditions for adults to feel comfortable and motivated during the time spent outside. Adult's involvement will influence the type of experiences that children have access to and how they incorporate new knowledge. From the experience acquired during the project it is possible to state that teamwork is a crucial component for quality planning and intervention, facilitating the need for constant evaluation and reflection upon children's well-being and involvement.

Besides from collaboration among professionals, families should participate as much as possible in outdoor play. If professionals explain to the parents why it is important to play outside and make an effective effort to get them involved and satisfied, possible negative reactions related to fears about children getting sick, dirty or injured will be progressively solved. It is important to never forget that most families just want the best for their children and it is the job of professionals to help them achieve this goal. Desirably, the valorization of outdoor time from parents will also promote the integration of these type of experiences in family routines, creating conditions for stronger and more positive effects in children's development.

To overcome parents' anxieties and to promote quality outdoor play experiences, it was very important to assure that all children had proper equipment to play outside in different weather conditions (e.g. waterproof suits and rubber boots for winter). Having the adequate clothes is an essential dimension to assure children's safety and health. Also, we encouraged the parents to talk to the children's paediatrician about outdoor play, especially regarding children's respiratory and skin problems. This effort of articulation between health and education professionals was very important to earn parents' confidence in this learning approach.

Finally, the cooperation between family and school allowed for a progressive improvement of structures and play resources available outside. Often, parents offered their skills and time to the setting, working afterhours to build or recover play structures (e.g. trees houses, benches and tables for children) or collecting daily objects for children to play with (e.g. kitchen supplies to play with soil and water).

During the development of the project we always good lines of communication with families, trying to find solutions and strategies that satisfied everybody's needs.

Final thoughts

The need to guarantee that children have the possibility to play outside, facing adventures and challenges, without being constantly engaged in activities controlled by adults is a recent concern for most western societies. We have evolved to a more modern, technological, and globalized world but, in the process, we lost habits and experiences that influence our quality of life. One of the major challenges of present and future generations may be the need to find a balance between an increasingly "busy" society and the preservation of experiences of well-being and connection to the world. The educational settings have an important role in this process, guarantying that during the first years of life children have the means and opportunities to develop a positive self-esteem, curiosity and motivation about learning and good socialization

skills. The quality experienced in education services may help the child to overcome vulnerabilities related to other contexts (e.g. poverty, low levels of parents' education). Opportunities to contact with Nature, deal with risks, and socialize with peers and adults in a responsive and caring environment will contribute to quality educational experiences, influencing children's motivation and enthusiasm about learning and school.

The valorization of early years and outdoor play can be understood as a mean to promote healthier lifestyles, acknowledging that today's children will be the adults of tomorrow. Parents, educators, and policy makers should work to promote better childhood experiences, guarantying that children's interests are considered in urban and school planning. Without ignoring the slow rhythm of practices transformation, it is important to instigate educational settings to promote outdoor play, considering the amount of time that children spent in school and the impact of those experiences for learning and development.

With these ideas in mind, this testimony aims to highlight the importance of outdoor play in natural environments for children's learning and development and to inspire and challenge others to take advantage of the opportunities that the outdoor environment can offer.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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