



Bringing Summer Into Session: Goal-Focused Learning Outdoors

As the weather gets warmer and summer approaches, many families are requesting more outdoor sessions — and this can be a great opportunity for naturalistic teaching, increased engagement, and meaningful social interaction.

Summer naturally brings more opportunities for movement, play, community outings, and interaction with others. Clients may encounter peers at playgrounds, parks, sidewalks, or community spaces more often during this season, which creates valuable opportunities to generalize skills in real-world settings. While the environment may feel more relaxed, our focus on skill acquisition, behavior support, and meaningful progress remains the same.

The goal is to balance the fun and flexibility of summer activities with intentional teaching opportunities.

Pair Goals with Natural Outdoor Activities

Outdoor settings create endless opportunities to work on goals in ways that feel motivating, functional, and socially meaningful.

Some examples:

- Mand training during playground activities (“more bubbles,” “help,” “my turn,” “come play”)
- Social skills through turn-taking games, cooperative play, initiating interactions, responding to peers, and maintaining conversations
- Following directions during walks, scavenger hunts, outdoor games, or structured activities
- Tolerance and flexibility when plans change, waiting for turns, sharing materials, or transitioning between activities
- Listener responding during outdoor play and community-based instruction
- Independent leisure skills through structured play activities and appropriate engagement with outdoor materials
- Functional communication by encouraging clients to request, comment, answer questions, and engage socially in natural settings
- Emotional regulation and coping skills by practicing calming strategies and flexibility in busy or stimulating environments

Summer Encourages Socialization & Generalization

One of the biggest benefits of outdoor sessions is the increase in natural social opportunities. Summer environments often expose clients to:

- More peer interactions
- Group play opportunities
- Community expectations
- Shared spaces and activities
- Increased communication opportunities

These moments can help clients practice and generalize skills outside of the home setting in a way that feels more natural and meaningful. Outdoor sessions can be especially helpful for promoting independence, spontaneous communication, and social engagement.

Keep Sessions Structured — Even Outside

Outdoor sessions can feel less structured, so it's important to maintain clear expectations and routines.

A few helpful strategies:

- Preview the session plan with the client
- Alternate movement activities with calmer or structured tasks when needed
- Use visual schedules or timers when appropriate
- Bring reinforcement items that are portable and motivating
- Continue collecting accurate data throughout the session
- Maintain clinical focus even in more playful environments

Natural environment teaching still requires intentional teaching moments and clear clinical goals.

Supervision & Safety Reminders

Please remember that outdoor sessions require increased awareness and supervision at all times.

Another adult aside from the BT must always be present during outdoor sessions. BTs should never be the sole supervising adult in public or outdoor environments. Please ensure parents/caregivers are aware of this expectation prior to transitioning sessions outside.

Additionally, continue to prioritize:

- Hydration and weather awareness
- Appropriate supervision at all times
- Professional boundaries in public settings
- Parent communication regarding location changes or community outings

Final Reminder

Outdoor sessions do not mean “less learning” — often, they allow clients to practice skills in more meaningful, real-world settings. The warm weather gives us a chance to build engagement, increase social opportunities, generalize skills, and create positive learning experiences while still maintaining clinical integrity.

If you are ever unsure how to appropriately transition goals or teaching strategies into an outdoor setting, please reach out to your supervising BCBA for guidance and support. We are here to help ensure sessions remain both fun and clinically effective.

If you're ever unsure about a situation, please reach out to your supervisor. We're here to support you.

Thank you for the care, professionalism, and heart you bring to this work every day.

A TRIUMPH INITIATIVE

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