

**North Carolina Department of  
Environment And Natural Resources**

**Division of Environmental Health**

James B. Hunt Jr., Governor  
Bill Holman, Secretary  
Linda C. Sewall, Director  
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November 15, 2000

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Environmental Health Supervisors, Directors, and Coordinators  
**FROM:** Charles L. McKenzie, Regional Environmental Health Specialist  
Children's Environmental Health Branch  
**THROUGH:** Ed Norman, Program Supervisor  
Children's Environmental Health Branch  
**SUBJECT:** Outdoor Learning Environments (play areas)

There has been an increased interest in new and alternative designs and components for Outdoor Learning Environments (OLEs) at child care centers. Some of these components and activities, although offering new and exciting experiences for the children, may introduce unforeseen health or safety hazards. For example, the inclusion of frog, fish or other types of "ponds", untreated fountains, bird baths and similar water using components may, as studies have shown, contain salmonella and other disease causing pathogens. If present, this type of OLE feature should be inaccessible to children except under strict supervision of their use and always followed by proper handwashing procedures. Additional areas of concern in OLEs include, but are not limited to the following:

-Application of mulch, rubber chips, gravel and similar material over onsite waste disposal systems should be avoided. These materials may cause reduction in evaporative action from nitrification fields, moisture retention and compaction of soil. OLEs should not be placed over onsite waste systems if at all possible.

-The installation of below ground portions of play equipment (e.g., supports for swings, climbing equipment) could damage nitrification lines allowing wastewater to seep onto the ground surface.

-All sewage lift stations, electrical boxes, HVAC units and similar devices should be fenced or otherwise made inaccessible to children.

-Canwashing and similar facilities should be excluded from the OLE or made inaccessible to children.

-Vegetation should be kept mowed or cut back at least 2 feet outside the perimeter of the OLE fence to reduce vermin harborage. The fence should be kept clear of vegetation to eliminate growth of poison ivy and other problematic plants. This will also aid in visual assessment of the OLE. Contact your local Co-operative Extension Agent for approved types of herbicides and methods of use.

-OLEs should be carefully checked for any hazards including animals, insects, rodents, glass, protruding nails and damaged equipment.