



FOREST PRESCHOOL AND NATURE BASED CHILD CARE

Deeply Rooted Development

Planting the seeds of inclusion and nature

by Kathryn Markham-Petro

When you think about playing outside as a younger child, what comes to mind? Are you and your friends all standing on asphalt or concrete with no toys in hand? When you looked around, was everyone playing the same game in the same way? Are you standing still on the playground, shivering and waiting for recess to end?

In all likelihood, being outside as a child does not conjure up any of these images. Most adults fondly remember outdoor play as a time for exploration. You were free to move your body any which way you wanted to. Falling down and getting up were part of that time outside and from those falls you learned what your body could and could not do. By playing with different kinds of snow, you figured out that not all snow packed together with pressure and you learned how thick the ice on puddles needed to be to support your weight. You learned that if you didn't heed your parent's advice and wear those hats, mittens and boots that you really did get cold, wet and uncomfortable. When you played you took risks, pushed your own limits and you learned from your mistakes. Those sounds and images are called joy and those are important aspects of learning and childhood, which sadly are missing today in the lives of many children.

When children are outside, they not only learn these incredibly important life skills, they learn and experience what can be classified into "subjects" like math, science, geography and physical education (Williams & Dixon, 2013). Whether we label it outdoor education, nature school, outdoor time, or forest school, taking children out of their indoor environment produces a multitude of benefits. Every domain of learning can



be promoted in the outdoor environment for every child, often times more effectively than we can facilitate development inside the classroom.

Gardens offer an opportunity for language growth, particularly for English as second language learners. Facilitating discussions between children about the things they are noticing, doing, feeling, and smelling presents children with a chance for real life natural conversations (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009, p. 130). As Canada welcomes children and families from other countries and the face of our classrooms continues to change and evolve, how can we use the outdoors to support the learning of those who are *different* in our programs? How can we make them feel less different and more a part of our classrooms and programs?

Being outdoors in natural play spaces offers irreplaceable opportunities for children to learn about each other, and about themselves, in a different way. Think about being out in nature and the risks involved in simply trying to get through spaces where there are trees, mud, puddles and if you are lucky, wildlife. Moving through that space provides lessons in math, geography, science, communication, respect and sense of self. Traditional turf and asphalt spaces offer play experiences but



when we provide children with “green” space, this creates a new level of active real time learning.

Outdoor spaces and inclusion

When traditional outdoor spaces have green areas added to them in early learning or school environments, children are more likely to be inclusive of children who have different abilities, races and gender than themselves because of the balance of active and quiet play that appeals to a large variety of children than typical outdoor spaces do (Dyment & Bell, 2008).

Creating spaces for children to interact with those that are not the same as they are becomes particularly important as we become increasingly more diverse.

This tendency to be more accepting of differences extends to indoor play as well. Children who spend more time outside in naturalized spaces are better problem solvers and collaborate more with others. This effect carries over to indoor learning environments (Passey, 2014, p. 34). Children feel more connected to spaces when they are involved in the planning and maintenance of these spaces. This has been shown to foster higher levels of acceptance and exploration (Pivnick, 2001). We want children to participate in owning the space as much as they are cognitively able to do so for that sense of connection to occur and increase.

Gardening makes an outdoor learning environment a reality

Perhaps you have been inspired by a class or school that spends the entire day outside in a seemingly idealic outdoor space but were discouraged by the rules, barriers and restrictions that prohibit that from becoming a reality. Oftentimes we feel constrained by the space we have been allocated or excluded from the space we wish to access. While you might not be able to create an entire classroom outside all year round right away, you can provide valuable learning experiences on a smaller scale.



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Use a large pot for seeds or bulbs in your outdoor space. This affords children the experience of gardening in a meaningful way and contributes to greening an otherwise sterile space. If you are in an area where you are concerned about vandalism or theft, place these pots on top of scooter boards, thereby ensuring they are portable and not too heavy to lift.

Connecting with community gardens opens numerous opportunities for collaboration and networking that are often literally right in our backyards. Community gardens connect



your program not only to physical space that you can use for planting, but also to those community members who can offer their expertise and advice.

Many of us have memories of planting the bean in a cup as part of our exposure to gardening in the classroom. Although these activities are initially enjoyable for the children, once the bean starts to grow they are sent home and rarely do children get the satisfaction of seeing the full cycle of planting. Children understand the abstract concept of change over time more completely when their attention is drawn to the successive transformations, particularly when they chart the growth.

If you are limited to only being able to plant something to remain in your classroom in a cup, you can expand this project into larger bins so that more children can observe the growth. This will facilitate informal yet meaningful small group conversations about what they are observing and detecting. You could even convert your sensory table to a larger grow table. Beans are easy to grow but lettuce seeds grow faster and allow children to try different kinds of greens like kale, spinach, chard, red oak leaves, arugula and romaine. They also grow with low light so ideal for growing inside.

Indoor lettuce gardens allow not only for that direct observation of growth and the conditions necessary for that growth but offer a wonderful opportunity to discuss flavours that are perhaps novel and unique. Lettuce also presents an easy cooking activity that even toddlers can accomplish as it simply involves “ripping” lettuce and allows all children to experience lettuce in a truly sensory manner.

Funding gardens and space greening projects

- Always start with your families for donations and then look to your neighbours.
- Most areas have horticulture societies or community garden collectives that will happily donate seeds for gardens, expertise and perhaps cash if they have the means.
- Many high schools and community colleges have horticulture programs that have extra seeds, seedlings, potting soil or other things you need to start your project.
- Many college programs have requirements for volunteer hours that the students must log. Offering your program as a means to meet these students volunteer requirements creates a community connection and exposes the children in your class to different people.

Asking for donations from these organizations provides real materials for the class garden to start right away. You can start

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an indoor garden anytime during the year, and move it outside once the weather allows.

When you hear about children learning outdoors or about nature and gardening you might think it is just another fad in education or something not meant for where you are or for the children in your class. It is time to consider all the research revealing the importance of outside learning experiences, and it is time to rekindle the joy that comes from being outside. Let us put this into practice in every class, for all children of every age so that they too can create these fond memories of the wonders of being outdoors.

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