



FOREST PRESCHOOL AND NATURE BASED CHILD CARE

Nature is Calling – Please Act

by Dr. Diane Kashin, RECE

This article serves as a call to action. It is an invitation to actively participate in a growing social movement to benefit young children. Social movements are characterized by people who get together to advance shared ideas, with the intention to bring about change for the betterment of society. We must change from the indoor culture of childhood to an outdoor culture. We are in a serious, real crisis. Childhood, as it has been known for hundreds of years is changing with children spending more time indoors and less time outdoors. This is not the childhood of my past. My fondest memories are of those times spent playing outdoors in unstructured activities and without supervision. Today's children are being kept indoors for many reasons. The perception may be that the outdoors is not safe or educators may not know what to do with children when they are outside.

Early childhood educators may know more about curriculum programming for indoors rather than for outdoors. Outside, they may feel more secure supervising children in playgrounds. There is also a tendency to bring “the outdoors in” by creating naturalistic indoor learning environments full of loose parts such as rocks and pinecones. Naturalizing indoor environments should not diminish the experiences we offer children in the outdoors. Perhaps we should think about leaving the outdoors where it is and bringing the children outside to the loose parts as they are found in nature. If you haven't already started to think about the importance of nature and outdoor play experiences for children, perhaps it is time that you did? An indoor childhood threatens the health, fitness and well-being of children. This call to action is asking you to go outside with children more often. Children's lives are shaped by the places they inhabit. Help children make a stronger connection to the natural world.

There are many ways that you can bring nature back to children

Look inside the playground. Can you naturalize the space? Bringing natural loose parts into your playground will increase



children's opportunities for learning in and with nature. You can also look beyond the fence. Is there a forest, a stream, a meadow, a ravine or hillside where children can experience and learn about the natural world? Children love spending time in nature. Zoe, the five year old in the photos would rather be in nature than anywhere else. How different is she than all children from infants to school aged children? The only difference is that she has had the opportunities. All children want to be outside!

If you go outside with children you will be joining an already growing movement in early childhood education. According to David Sobel who wrote the book *Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens: The Handbook for Outdoor Learning* (2016), “the movement is nature-based” (p. 1). Nature preschools in North America go back to the 1970's as they began as an offshoot of the original Earth Day. Forest kindergartens surfaced in the 1960s in Scandinavia and now there are thousands throughout the world (Sobel, 2016).

Starting nature preschools or forest kindergartens may not be in the sights for most early childhood educators in Canada. They take a financial investment and a commitment to site and risk management. But embedding nature into your programs and curriculum takes mostly a commitment of time. Take the time to invite children to be in nature.

Give them opportunities to explore, climb, discover and to just be in nature. These types of experiences contribute to children's



healthy development. The benefits far outweigh the risks. In fact, there are more detrimental consequences to children remaining indoors.

The recently published *Position Statement on Outdoor Play* (2015), Susan Herrington, MLA, University of British Columbia; Dr. William Pickett, Queen's University, clearly outlines the importance of active, outdoor play (<http://www.participation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Position-Statement-on-Active-Outdoor-Play-EN-FINAL.pdf>). Outdoors, children who engage in active and even risky play will not only receive the health benefits of such a lifestyle, they will become closer to the world outside increasing the potential for environmental stewardship. Children are unable to take care of a world that they do not know. They need to learn to love the earth.

Children don't always have the outdoor opportunities that they should as their time outside and even their time to play, may be limited by the adults in their lives. When I was a practicing early childhood educator, I would take children outdoors for the minimum time required and they would play in a fenced playground even though just beyond the fence was a large green space with trees, grass, rocks, sticks, mud, hills and earth. I never ventured beyond the playground. I thought the children needed the structures in the playground in order to play. That was the scope of my understanding of what constituted outdoor play and learning. Now, I know that there is a world to discover and to learn from as long as there is a tree, a patch of earth or a puddle. In this natural world, true and authentic learning occurs. In childhoods of the past, where outdoor play was plentiful, children learned to handle their own quarrels, negotiate turns, participate in risky

**Embedding nature into
your programs and
curriculum takes mostly
a commitment of time.
Take the time to invite
children to be in nature.**

play, problem solve, create with natural materials and build relationships with the flora and fauna and other inhabitants of the land. We must keep this tradition alive.

The forests, paths, flowers and creatures that inhabit nature are filled with wonders to explore. What do they see when they lie on the grass and look up at the sky?

What can they find when they look under

the rock? As they walk along the forest path, what is there to discover and play with? What can they learn as they balance themselves on a log? Curriculum can and should emerge outdoors. What children naturally do outdoors such as small world constructions, den building, collecting berries, finding their way through untracked woods, following animal tracks (Sobel, 2016) support development across all domains. Math, science, art, language, literacy, dramatic and construction play all can happen outdoors!

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood ~ Rachel Carson

The forest and nature school movement is in its infancy in Canada but in other places in the world it has a longer history. Movements are expansive in scope and involve coordinated and preventative action by many. There is no "quick fix" or "magic bullet" for resolving the play, fitness, and health crises for children. The approaches must be multiple (Frost, 2009).



Know that this increased emphasis on outdoor play is not just a trend, it is a growing movement and you have the chance to be on the ground floor! The ground is covered with dirt, grass, sand and mud.

Diane Kashin Ed.D, RECE. Diane earned her Bachelor of Honours from York University and an Early Childhood Education diploma from Seneca College. Diane worked in child care for a number of years before beginning graduate studies at the OISE/U of T and teaching early childhood

As a child care provider and early childhood educator, you are in an ideal position to make a difference. Learn more about forest and nature schools from Forest School Canada.
<http://www.forestschoolcanada.ca/>.

You can also participate in a research study funded by the Lawson Foundation <http://bit.ly/1VjIKD2> or by contacting me at diane.kashin@ryerson.ca.