

# Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



## NATURE PRESCHOOL



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

The importance of “connection to nature” for very young children has been covered in some of my previous articles. It has also become more and more recognized by educators as an essential part of early childhood. Boulder County has become a leader in this respect through the work of their *Environmental Education Collaborative*, which has established an E Movement and E Guidelines.



I am pleased to say that Thorne Nature Experience has been one of the leaders in creating this cooperative coalition of all the environmental educators throughout Boulder County. The group has worked together, as well as with the Boulder Valley School and Saint Vrain School Districts, to develop E Guidelines for preschool through high school youth.

Today I am focusing on early childhood education because Thorne is currently planning to launch an environmental education, (or nature preschool), during the coming year. This will be a test of the basic E Guidelines for this age group. We are very excited to be doing this. A few of our staff members



Photo courtesy of Thorne Nature Experience

have travelled to other parts of the USA to learn how some already-established nature preschools are operating.

The E Guidelines state: “We want to nurture our students’ curiosity and active exploration while fostering respect for the natural world and for each other.” They want our students to know that they do have influence on the environment and on their community by the way they choose to care for themselves, for others, and for places, (especially those places in nature).

These guidelines deal with a whole-student approach and are structured around the metaphor of a student’s head, heart, hands, and feet. At the preschool level, the concept of “head” can be as simple as noticing that there are different kinds of plants and

animals; or that all animals need food in order to live; or that the sun provides heat and light.

The concept of “heart” involves social-emotional learning, which implies awareness of and genuine caring for the living things (natural and human) around them, thus a caring for others. In this way, preschool kids can also begin to develop sensitivity and a sense of belonging to their community, indeed an emotional attachment.

The “hands” represent action and service, which at the preschool level can be as simple as helping mom or dad with a chore, feeding the dog, or watering the plants. This helps them develop a positive sense of self, which becomes even more important as they grow and mature, eventually developing a

“civic voice” and the concept of service to their community.

Finally, the “feet” represent a connection to the place and the community in which they live. They do this through exploration. This gives them a direct connection to “place.” Wild play, which I described in my last article, would be a good example. This is unstructured play in nature, perhaps even in one’s own back yard. The result should be a sense of belonging and, eventually, an innate desire to protect and care for both natural and human communities. As the E Guidelines point out, this progression begins with home, then gradually expands outward, as a child grows up, through school, neighborhood, community, watershed, region, nation, and world!

Since we in Boulder County are blessed with so much protected natural open space, it is possible to easily expand a preschool child’s world to include a nearby greenbelt, stream, pond, or meadow. This should be a key part of any nature preschool program!

*Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute), a nonprofit organization headquartered in Boulder. For 64 years they have helped “connect youth to nature!” For information about their programs, check their website at [www.thornenature.org](http://www.thornenature.org) or email [info@thornenature.org](mailto:info@thornenature.org) or please call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.*

