

Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



Nature Preschools



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

Early childhood is a critical time to provide opportunities to spend time playing outdoors, building upon children's inherent curiosity and love of nature. This is certainly the role of nature preschools. A growing body of research shows that frequent play in nature stimulates all of a child's developmental domains. These include their cognitive, creative, physical, social/emotional, and spiritual development. We often referred to this as "wild play." To put it simply: "kids grow better in nature."

In the past few decades, children's access to frequent, unstructured time has become much less common. Influences such as overscheduled lives, parental and teacher fears, urbanization, standardized testing, and technology (television, computer games, cellphones, etc.) have had a profound impact on the amount of time young children spend outdoors. Studies have shown that American children now spend almost eight hours each day with electronic media versus barely 30 minutes per week in unstructured outdoor play. The result is that many of today's children suffer from what best-selling author Richard Louv



calls "nature deficit disorder" in his book *Last Child in the Woods*. This term describes the psychological, physical, and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature, particularly for children in their vulnerable developing years.

In an attempt to reverse these trends, there is a growing movement happening in the world of early childhood education that is bringing a focus on nature into preschools. In this country and around the world, nature-based preschools and kindergartens are on the rise. A recent national survey shows the number of nature preschools operating in the USA is at an all-time high of more than 250. Sixty years ago, there were none.

The professional association of nature-based early childhood educators, the Natural Start Alliance, defines nature preschools as ones that use nature as the organizing principle for their programs and that addresses both child development and the development of an "ecological identity." Nature preschools spend the majority of the school day outside and, as often as possible, integrate

nature into the overall learning experience.

One of the main purposes of a true nature preschool is to support the holistic development of young children and their relationship to the natural world. We feel that this is best supplied through joyful, hands-on, place-based, developmentally-appropriate experiences that nurture the whole child and foster an emotional connection to nature.

The educational philosophy here is to provide an early childhood educational experience that initiates young children into a deep relationship with the natural world, thereby planting the seed for lifelong environmental stewardship. Daily immersion in nature with caring mentors, and with a focus on supporting early childhood development, fosters the growth of the whole child. It is important for teachers to create a safe and caring learning environment that provides both structured routines as well as unstructured time to explore and play in nature.

Since this year is Thorne Nature Experience's 65th Anniversary, I would like to

clearly state our core beliefs, which are (1) nature promotes the health and well-being of the whole child; (2) nature is the ideal venue for academic growth, imaginative play, social/emotional learning, and problem solving, all of which promote active play in general; (3) frequent, immersive experiences in nature, especially with a mentor present, cultivates a sound environmental ethic; (4) place-based environmental education connects children to their local community and is the starting point for responsible citizenship; and (5) today's youth are tomorrow's environmental stewards and leaders. This is why we do as we do!

Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute), a non-profit organization headquartered in Boulder. For 65 years they have helped "connect youth to nature!" For information about their programs, please check their website at www.thornenature.org or email info@thornenature.org or call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.

