

Inspiring Future Nature Enthusiasts

It has never been more evident that we are emotionally, physically, and mentally connected to this earth. The global pandemic has further proven the need to protect and conserve natural greenspaces, as people across the world flocked to these areas in pursuit of the great benefits that nature has on our mental and physical health. Since nature has always been there for us, we must in turn dedicate ourselves to making it a part of our daily lives, fully appreciating its irreplaceable resources while learning to protect and conserve them.

As we look to future generations to take on this great responsibility, we must inspire tomorrow's environmentalists and passionate nature enthusiasts. As caregivers and educators, we must show them the importance and benefits of nature, through outdoor learning and opportunities to experience risk-assessed activities such as climbing trees and hiking muddy trails.

When we teach about nature and the environment within the environment, children can develop an intimate, sensory, and experienced-based relationship with the earth, and a sense of awareness and responsibility for protecting and understanding natural systems. When we learn about something, and can touch, smell, hear, feel, and taste it, we become more connected. Outdoor education fosters these connections.

Benefits of Nature and Outdoor Education

Whether in a play-based, child-led, or structured setting, outdoor learning is beneficial to childhood development. When children spend time outdoors, they are encouraged to use their imagination as there are no preconceived notions of what



they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to play. A stick found on the ground is no longer just a stick, it can also be a magic wand, play sword or arrow. Immersive outdoor play differs from traditional playgrounds as children can explore places like forests, creeks, and meadows, stop along the way to discover little critters, and use their imagination to find nature's very own swings, slides, and monkey bars.

In the great outdoors, children can develop their gross and fine motor skills through activities like climbing over logs, as this requires problem solving and understanding of bodily capability and strength. They learn resiliency and adaptability when they prepare to spend time in nature and consider the impacts and implications of changing weather and terrain conditions. Through these experiences, children develop a love, appreciation, and respect for nature and wildlife, and a growing desire to look after their environment.

With an endless list of benefits, it is important for teachers and schools in traditional settings to incorporate, support, fund, and

promote outdoor learning – especially in urban areas where students and communities do not have easy access to nature. It is equally important that parents and caregivers explore new ways of incorporating outdoor learning, through daily activities within family or after-school groups, or by enrolling children in nature school or outdoor learning programs.

Incorporate Nature into Daily Activities

When it comes to teaching children about nature and immersing them in their natural environment, every action makes a difference, and no action is too small.

Children enjoy exploring their own backyards, and when heading outdoors is not possible, learning about nature indoors can also be a wonderful experience. Consider planting a pollinator garden in your backyard to teach them about the importance and benefits of pollinators and native plants and trees.

Take a walk around your neighbourhood or head out on a hike to a local conservation area. While it can be tempting to direct or control this experience,

it is important to allow children to explore freely and take risks where appropriate. Allow them to stop along the way, discover and identify the different flora and fauna they come across, and ask questions. As they explore nature, remember to teach them to leave only footprints and take home only memories.

Nature and Outdoor Programs

For more than a decade, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) has offered outdoor educational programs, including seasonal day camps and most recently, Ball's Falls Nature School. The program provides students with specialized, small-group curriculum-based lessons in math, reading, writing, science, social science, and art – all in an outdoor setting led by educators certified by Ontario College of Teachers.

Learn more about NPCA's educational programs and Nature School at npca.ca/learning.

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