













Growing With Nature

Supporting Whole-Child Learning in Outdoor Classrooms



Table of Contents

 Nature's Lessons: A Way of Teaching	2
 Ideas Across the Curriculum: A Whole-Child Approach to Skill Development	6
 Language/Literacy	8
 Science	28
 Social/Emotional	50
 Mathematics	76
 Body Competence	88
 Creative Arts	116
 Visual/Spatial	132
 Final Thoughts	142
 References	143
 Acknowledgements	144

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Nature's Lessons: A Way of Teaching

**By Nancy Rosenow, Executive Director
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I'll never forget the moment when a five-year-old named Ella taught me a profound lesson about life, and about teaching. I was taking some funders on a quick tour through a nature-filled outdoor classroom when Ella approached us quietly and asked if we'd like to see something special. She pointed to a tree where a delicate light blue eggshell was dangling from a branch. "The baby bird just hatched," she told us in a hushed voice, her dark eyes shining. "Grownups are always in such a hurry. I was afraid you were going to miss this treasure of nature."

What a wake-up call. "Ella," I wanted to say, "*You* are a treasure of nature." And now, looking back, I'm sorry I didn't say it. Our hurried-up lifestyles can all too often cause us to miss much more than just the natural wonders of our world. How often are we grownups in such a hurry for children to master the alphabet, pass the next test or prepare for the next grade that we miss the treasure of who each child is as a unique individual? Are we giving ourselves, and our children, a chance to take a deep breath and enjoy our natural world, enjoy childhood, and enjoy each other? I believe that teaching with nature can be an antidote to our sometimes frantic approach to life in general.

It's no doubt that our children are growing up in a fast-paced world. Technology is a great connector, but it can also demand that we be instantly available to each other, no matter what. And, while it is wonderful to be able to turn on the television and "see" each other all over the world in real time, this often means our children are bombarded with horrific images of war or natural disasters right in their own homes. Where is the "safe haven" for our children these days?

One answer is that nature-filled outdoor classrooms can provide that safe haven. There, away from televisions, video games, smart phones and computers for a brief time each day, the world can slow down and everyone can breathe easier. Children can be children, adults can smile more, and discoveries can unfold slowly, with no expectation of "finding the one right answer."

What doesn't have to slow down, however, is learning.





For over a decade, our Dimensions Foundation teachers and researchers have been documenting the rich learning that happens when children and adults have the time and space to explore nature together. And, as adults all over the nation have built and begun to use what we call “Nature Explore Classrooms,” they too are documenting amazing results. Throughout this book you will hear from educators, parents and administrators who believe in teaching with nature. As these wonderful people share their stories, we hope you will discover a few common themes throughout:

- The richest kind of learning happens holistically.
- Children need the time and space to find out and express who they uniquely are.
- Intentionally designed outdoor classrooms can support children in this personally meaningful, whole-child learning. (The space becomes the third teacher.)
- Educators who support learning with nature help make amazing things happen.
- Families who enjoy meaningful experiences in the natural world give children an invaluable gift.
- Volunteers and community members play an important role in helping create effective nature-filled spaces.
- “Magic moments” in nature-filled spaces can enrich a child’s life forever.

Our stories come from interviews and some directly from our research. They mostly represent three age-groups: infants and toddlers; preschoolers; and elementary students.

That's because we've done most of our work with those ages over the past decade. Recently we've begun working with middle schools and high schools as parents and others ask, "Why can't this type of learning continue?" As more experiences with these older students are documented, you'll see more of our resources being developed for that age group.

Before you dive into the book, Ella would probably want me to urge you to be sure you take your time and savor the stories so you don't miss the "treasure" in each one. Following some of the stories, we have added a paragraph called "insights" that highlights the importance of the teaching and learning taking place. We invite you to discover insights of your own in each story. You are also invited to visit our Web site, natureexplore.org to view video clips from educators around the country that provide great insights into the value of teaching with nature.

As you discover other people's experiences, perhaps you will think about the children in your own life. Whether you are a teacher, a parent or grandparent, an administrator or a public official, we hope you will gain ideas and inspiration for ways you too can "teach with nature"...or make it possible where you live. And, when you do, it would be wonderful if you would share your own stories. You can send them to us at info@natureexplore.org.

Really, spaces filled with "nature's treasures" simply give us the venue we can use to show our children that our world (despite its "bad news") is still a good place. We all want our children to grow up knowing the world as a place full of wonder, a place worth learning about, a place worth caring for and protecting.

Consider the words of Rachel Carson's on the following page. They were written decades ago in her book, *Sense of Wonder*, and are perhaps more true today than ever before.





“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.”
(Carson, 1965)

We can each be that adult.