







Keeping it Growing

Sustaining Your Outdoor Classroom



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Foreword

The Study Behind This Book

In 2007, after a decade of research and field testing on the benefits for children of making regular, positive connections with nature, we published *Learning With Nature Idea Book: Creating Nurturing Outdoor Spaces for Children*. In that book, we laid out the guiding principles of designing natural outdoor classrooms for children. They were developed after years of direct observation of children and teachers, and field testing in a variety of settings throughout the United States. That publication became the foundation for the program we call Nature Explore, our joint endeavor with Arbor Day Foundation that helps schools, child care centers, nature centers, parks, libraries, museums, and other public spaces bring natural outdoor classrooms to their settings. Anywhere a traditional plastic and asphalt playground can be built could have a Nature Explore Classroom instead.

After a decade of helping organizations create nature-based outdoor classrooms, it became clear that although many had developed into thriving spaces, some were clearly struggling. We wondered, what was the difference? Were there some characteristics the thriving spaces had in common? Were there things we could learn that could help the struggling places get back on track?

With those questions in mind, we enlisted the help of two of our research consultants – Linda Esterling from LE Consulting and Patrick Geary from Midland University in Fremont, Nebraska – to help us find out. Our research director, Dr. Dana Miller, worked with Linda and Pat to create a protocol of questions for individual interviews and focus groups. They used purposeful selection to choose sites for the study. They picked a combination of thriving and struggling sites that represented various types of organizations (schools, early childhood programs, and nature centers) and diverse locations (urban, rural, Midwest, and West Coast).

Over the course of two years, interviews were held, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Results were compared and discussed until finally, the list of sustainability indicators was developed.

The good news is that when the struggling sites began putting the sustainability indicators into practice, things got better! These indicators provide the foundation for the book you're about to read. We've supplemented the explanations of each indicator with real world examples from Certified Nature Explore Classrooms throughout the United States. We hope the indicators listed on the next page will be positive tools for everyone to use to bring to children the joys of learning with nature for years to come.

Opposite Page: Child Saving Institute, Omaha, Nebraska



Sustainability Indicators

1 Integrate Missions

- 1.1 Clarify your program mission and goals
- 1.2 Integrate Nature Explore Classroom with program mission
- 1.3 Convey Nature Explore benefits to stakeholders

2 Structure Leadership

- 2.1 Create a process for supportive shared leadership that is not reliant on just one person
- 2.2 Clearly identify and communicate the decision-making process, including who makes final decisions
- 2.3 Build a decision-making system for evaluation and modification of space, materials, and experiences
- 2.4 Keep staff and families informed and involved
- 2.5 Focus on Nature Explore certification and re-certification goals
- 2.6 Regularly celebrate accomplishments

3 Inspire Staff

- 3.1 Offer initial Nature Explore training to staff as early in the process as possible
- 3.2 Determine staff's shared expectations for safety
- 3.3 Identify individual staff's unique interests, skills, and needs related to the outdoor classroom
- 3.4 Regularly discuss experiences and insights as a staff
- 3.5 Celebrate successes

4 Involve Families

- 4.1 Involve parents and extended families as early in the planning process as possible
- 4.2 Survey families for interests and skills to encourage volunteerism
- 4.3 Regularly communicate with families about successes and needs in the outdoor classroom

5 Build Community

- 5.1 Develop and maintain a volunteer and partner network
- 5.2 Provide orientation for volunteers
- 5.3 Recognize and celebrate volunteers and partners
- 5.4 Regularly communicate with your volunteer and partner network

6 Foster Caretaking

- 6.1 Choose low-maintenance plants and materials
- 6.2 Adopt a maintenance plan that includes clearly articulated timelines, responsibilities, and budgets
- 6.3 Identify maintenance tasks appropriate for children, staff, volunteers, and professionals
- 6.4 Maintain a posted list of maintenance and material needs



Introduction

Weaving a Beautiful Tapestry

“Nature uses only the longest threads to weave her patterns, so each small piece of her fabric reveals the organization of the entire tapestry.” — Richard P. Feynman

What kind of environment does it take to really nurture children? What elements are necessary in an environment for each of us to function to our potential? Many of us are looking for ways to make our jobs easier and our work more efficient. Many are aware that how we feel physically and mentally impacts our ability to do good work.

The same is true for children. Connecting more deeply with the world around us helps us become our best selves. Beautiful, sensory-rich, nature-filled outdoor classrooms can help us work and learn optimally. This is especially true when we spend time in these spaces daily.

Creating and sustaining Nature Explore Classrooms for daily use in schools, childcare programs, nature centers, and all of the places children spend time is a great way to foster nature connections. These spaces become the laboratories where children practice ‘hands-on’ and ‘minds-on’ learning at the same time. Outdoor classrooms also renew and fuel resiliency in adults, enabling us to support student’s efficient and effective learning. These thoughtfully designed classrooms support environmental advocates’ goals by sparking children’s intrigue and fascination with how nature works. As a foundational love of the earth is fostered, the seeds of stewardship take root.

The impact of a thriving Nature Explore Classroom weaves together the connections between the child, supportive adults, and the environment. Individuals come together as colorful threads that embody the hopes and dreams of the children who engage in meaningful experiences in your outdoor classroom.

As you sustain this process, your work weaves into the fabric of the family as well. Your thriving outdoor classroom can also weave its way into your community and beyond, as children learn to care for themselves, each other, and the Earth. At times, this thread can feel fragile, insignificant, and hard to notice, but have faith,

your thread is part of a rich tapestry with others who are working with passion and commitment. Together, we are a movement of strength and stability.

So how do we keep growing our outdoor classrooms? How can we keep enthusiasm high? How can we help all stakeholders and potential funders know how to provide meaningful learning experiences in these spaces and to understand why it is so important? This book is full of examples from others whose work forges a path to make your way easier.

As you read, imagine a tapestry with beautiful colors and textures representing cultures and communities of children from every region of the United States (and keep your pencil and notepad ready). Pause for a moment and visualize yourself wrapped within, taking comfort and finding hope. Embrace the ideas that work for you, use the questions offered to reflect, find inspiration in the photographs and perspectives, and develop your own comprehensive plan. Use the Sustainability Indicators to keep growing your outdoor classroom and your entire program in the process.

Mission In the first chapter, you will learn about ways to integrate your overall mission with that of your outdoor classroom. A clear mission guides sound decision-making and energizes your work.

Leadership Leadership is a key indicator in both getting your outdoor classroom built and in keeping it viable in the long-term. Chapter 2 focuses on shared leadership and is full of examples of powerful leadership.

Inspiration Thriving programs indicate that finding ways to inspire and involve staff is important. Chapter 3 is rich with ideas for staff development and strategies for tapping into individual strengths.

Families The fourth chapter emphasizes the vital role families play in children's lives. Learn how to partner with families in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Community Building a sense of community for your program and enhancing your relationship with your larger community is the fifth indicator that will be addressed. Read about creative ways programs have tapped into civic organizations and volunteer networks to strengthen their outdoor classroom in Chapter 5.

Caretaking The sixth indicator, addressed in Chapter 6, relates to site maintenance and stewardship. Maintenance can be your biggest challenge and your biggest opportunity. Involving children, families, volunteers and staff in caring for your outdoor classroom is the most effective way to teach life lessons on the importance of respect and care for the natural world.



Memphis Botanical Garden, Memphis, Tennessee