

Benefits of an Outdoor Education

by Anne Coyner

“I am struck by the fact that the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think that the same is true of human beings. We do not wish to see children precocious, making great strides in their early years like sprouts, producing a soft and perishable timber, but better if they expand slowly at first, as if contending with difficulties, and so are solidified and perfected. Such trees continue to expand with nearly equal rapidity to extreme old age.”

-Henry David Thoreau

Time spent in nature is a vital building block for children’s growth and development. Although I have always found this to be the case, facing the challenges of educating children during a worldwide pandemic has shed even more light on the benefits of being outside together. If we haven’t realized yet that getting children outside is positive for a multitude of reasons, the pandemic has hopefully pushed many of us right into a full embrace of teaching and learning outside. Forest programs have been expanding by leaps and bounds in the US in the last five years, and it seems they will hopefully only continue to do this. Teacher supports are popping up, curriculum developed, and programs on the edge of innovation have welcomed children and their parents into a new and different way of learning. These programs are invaluable and they also give form and structure to our grandparents’ idea – that going outside is simply good for all of us. Period. I began a year-round outdoor Parent & Child class in California in 2015 – and began another in Virginia in 2018. Both programs grew from a small dedicated group of parents and offer something you can’t get in a classroom: nature at its finest.

Nature based learning and outdoor opportunities for connection and education are growing. However, we are still swimming against the tide of US education – where our culture presses that children should learn more rapidly, learn more information earlier in life, and be held accountable for specific benchmarks from a very young age. Waldorf education in general and forest based education programs take a completely different perspective. In Waldorf education there is space for children to grow and bloom at a child’s pace. This space exists as the opposite end of the spectrum from standardized testing and curriculum, and a “how much can they learn and how fast” mentality. We see early childhood as the time of imagination. During these precious few years, children can live into their imaginative capacities, building that muscle of envisioning something that may not be exactly as their eyes see the world. This will serve them in every way as they grow into adulthood. Waldorf early childhood education weaves what are considered the traditional academics of science, math, and literature into hands-on experiences of baking, painting, sewing, building, gardening, physical play outdoors, nature and archetypal stories, song paired with movement, and reverence for the natural world. The time before age 7 is considered essential for these activities, which are presented as something to experience with your entire body and mind.

Children given these experiences -- that meet their developmental needs without pushing -- thrive and are ready for more traditional academic learning in first grade. Forest and nature based programs such as ours allow for even further blossoming of the children-- science and good sense tell us that being outdoors bathes us in sensory awareness. The feel of the wind and temperature, the sound of birds, the sight of growing things, the smell of the grass, and the taste of nourishing foods – this rich sensory input not only helps us feel more alive and awake to learning, it is literally laying neural pathways each moment. The outdoors can easily accommodate our big feelings, our loud voices, and our running feet. The things that are sometimes too much in a classroom setting are felt as a true release outdoors for young children (and their adults!) In a Forest program, our classroom is literally alive and we are seeing, smelling and hearing an emerging world that will be different every single day we are together.

In keeping with our desire to deepen our child's connection to nature, and honor our child's need for playtime in a natural play space, I invite you to spend a moment reflecting on your experiences outdoors with your child. Think of your favorite moments, and what seemed to really feed your child, and what your child seems to most enjoy together with you or other children outside. After identifying these moments, think of how to increase these times together or how to carve out more outdoor time into your family life. Enrolling your child in a Forest program is a guaranteed way to get your child outside, in a community of children, among the trees and with an experienced instructor. Your decision to bring your child into a Forest program at this young age will have ripple effects into your child's entire life, and the life of your family. You and your family will continue to make choices throughout your child's life, choices that will bring great joy and growth in your lives together. Your intentional participation in the pioneering movement of outdoor learning is a true gift to both your child and yourself.

**Thank you for your interest in our Forest Parent & Child Program
at the Charlottesville Waldorf School!**

**August 2020 Forest Parent & Child classes on Thursday and Fridays,
enrolling children ages 18 months through 6 years, with a caregiver.**

