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Returning to Our Natural Roots: Learning to Love Nature with Children (A Workshop Series for Early  
Childhood Educators)

By

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## ABSTRACT

Play is essential for the health and development of young children. The environment where children play can influence the quality of their play experience. The health and cognitive benefits afforded to children while playing in natural settings are well-documented. The forest, with its many natural features, is an ideal location for children's play. It provides opportunities for a variety of beneficial play experiences. Other outdoor spaces containing natural elements are beneficial for play, provided there are natural features that children can explore.

Young children are not getting enough time to play outside in nature. Many factors contribute to children losing time to play in natural settings. Access to outdoor spaces has become limited for children and adults who care for children are reluctant to take them to places with natural elements. Children are becoming more and more sedentary, and are viewing screens from electronic devices for up to seven hours per day. Child physical and mental health has been negatively impacted because of the steady decline in outdoor play. Early childhood educators [ECEs] can help reverse this trend by providing the children they care for ample opportunities for unstructured play in natural areas. Many ECEs feel uncomfortable outdoors, and as a result, provide limited opportunities for play in nature.

Early childhood professionals need knowledge about the benefits of play in nature, as well as skills to increase their confidence when taking children to outdoor play spaces. ECEs can play a valuable role in improving the health and wellness of children, by providing them with opportunities for play in natural spaces. They need training to ensure they have the ability, knowledge, and desire to take children to natural spaces frequently. There are limited

opportunities for ECEs in Nova Scotia to become trained in the knowledge and skills needed to provide high-quality outdoor play experiences for children. This workshop series will help ECEs in Halifax who are reluctant to take children to wilder places feel more comfortable and confident doing so. The six sessions will take the participant from simple to more challenging activities when working with young children outdoors. The desired outcome for this series of workshops is that ECEs will gain skills and confidence taking children to natural play spaces.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Literature Review**

Early childhood educators are trained to view play as fundamental for learning in the early years. Providing an environment for children where they are free to explore, build, create, and experiment is vital for children's emotional and physical development (Dietze & Kashin, 2012). Results of recent research have indicated that outdoor play is highly beneficial for young children as it reduces stress levels of children and adults, symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyper-Activity Disorder, obesity, and aggression while at the same time increasing the activity level and positive social interactions among children (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000; Rivkin, 2014).

The benefits of outdoor play depend on the quality of the environment that children experience outdoors. Charles, Louv, Bodner, Guns, & Stahl (2009), the founders of the Children and Nature Network, expressed concern regarding the growing trend to decrease or eliminate outdoor play time for children for fear of liability. They noted that when children do get outdoor time, it is often on playgrounds that have little natural vegetation and are dominated by concrete. The lack of a variety of natural elements on playgrounds may result in children being perceived as engaging in more aggressive behaviour than those who have more frequent access to playgrounds with such features. Fjortoft and Sageie (2000) also discovered that children who had access to many different natural features during their play had improved motor development

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when compared to those who had access to a more traditional urban playground, of concrete and mass produced playground structures.

Richard Louv (2006), one of the leading voices of the movement to get children back outdoors, stated that cities need to plan for play spaces that have natural elements preserved within them to allow children to play and explore in nature, but at the same time have adequate liability insurance and safety features. Louv cites Central Park in New York City as an example of a green space within an urban setting that has many natural features. Louv strongly supports allowing children the freedom to explore the natural elements of landscapes, even if they harm the features of an environment while they are exploring, the experiences they gain outweigh the harm that may be done. For example, allowing children to build a treehouse may damage the tree, but children will gain a love for trees in the process, as well as other benefits. This way of thinking may be valid, but caution needs to be exercised when allowing children to explore nature to the point of damaging the environment. Adults need to model for children respect for nature, and encourage them to explore their surroundings while preserving and protecting it (Wilson, 1999).

Rivkin (2014) stated health benefits increase when children and adults are exposed to natural elements in the environment. Torquati & Ernst (2013) noted that many of today's early childhood educators are reluctant to take children into more natural settings, due to their own discomfort. They note that outdoor play alone is beneficial to children. However, the more natural the setting, the more benefits there are for them. Those who have access to natural outdoor areas are better able to focus

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on tasks than those who only have access to human-built play areas with limited natural features. Warden (2010) also indicated that there are multiple developmental benefits to be gained when children are immersed in nature. She speculated that providing natural elements for children's play improves their development. For example, children playing in a forest surrounded by natural elements is the optimal situation to enhance and stimulate their imaginations as well as their social, language, physical, and emotional abilities. Natural areas and 'playscapes' (Keeler, 2008) increase children's understanding of nature, and provide them with many developing benefits. These include a heightened appreciation for the natural world, a deep connection to wild places and things, and having experiences that are described as spiritual (Fjortoft, & Sageie, 2000; Kelly, & White, 2012; Louv, 2006; Rivkin, 2014). Given these benefits, it is essential that ECEs ensure that children have opportunities to play in natural settings. Unfortunately, not all ECEs are prepared to bring children to nature. This reluctance may be due to their own lack of knowledge about the benefits of play in nature, their attitude and biases regarding natural settings, play and children, or their fear of liability (Torquati & Ernst, 2013).

Natural environments have been defined by Torquati & Ernst (2013):

Natural environments are those that contain many natural elements found in the local ecosystem such as plants, animals, rocks, water, and insects.

There is a range of natural environments, from those that are nearly wild,



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such as a nature center, to those that contain a few human-made materials and surfaces such as slides, balls, or concrete, to those that contain a mix of many human-made materials and natural elements (p. 192).

In this definition, the natural environment is seen as being on a spectrum, with “wild” being on one end, and human-made materials incorporated into the natural environment at the other. Because it is difficult to access wilder parts of nature, and because greater diversity of natural elements and features adds to children’s overall health benefits (Fjortoft, & Sageie, 2000), it is best to pursue the wilder end of the spectrum whenever possible when planning for outdoor experiences.

Attitudes of adult caregivers influence a child’s perception of the outdoor play experience. Facilitating outdoor play in nature can be challenging in urban and even rural settings. Society has lost its focus on providing outdoor play in nature in favour of ‘safe’ structured activities and use of technology (Louv, 2006). Phenice and Griffore (2003) found that children in Western urban society have become disconnected from nature. They argue that when children are denied access to wild and natural spaces, and do not have guidance from adults who love and respect nature, they lose their sense of

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belonging to nature and grow up to be adults who view nature as something to be dominated. In contrast, Clinebell (1996) noted that children are naturally drawn to other living organisms, and adults have a responsibility to nurture this sense of biophilia or love of the natural world and the creatures within it. Without adults to guide and nurture this affinity for nature, it might become lost when they become adults.

Phenice and Griffore (2003) state that 'preschool professionals' are invaluable role models for children, in expressing positive attitudes for nature. Therefore, in order for teachers to want to take children into natural settings, they had to be willing to embrace the uncertainty and risk involved in providing 'wilder' experiences for young children (Kelly & White, 2012). Teachers need to know that the benefits are greater than the risk of taking children to places where there may be danger (i.e.; the joys of a bodies of water can be experienced while being mindful of the risk of drowning). ECEs need to be informed of the many learning opportunities that playing in natural settings provides indirectly. By climbing a tree, children are learning about trees in a fun, multi-sensory way (Torquati & Ernst, 2013.) Children who have many opportunities to play in wild settings, may gain a love for nature that will stay with them their entire lives (Kelly & White, 2012; Sobel, 1993). ECEs may feel that they do not have the information or experience needed to take young children on an excursion to more natural places. As an early childhood educator, I have observed that most outings take place (if at all) to playgrounds and buildings that have fences and walls. If children are not being given the opportunity to explore nature and they do not have easy access to a more natural

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playground, their exposure to and appreciation of nature will be limited (Charles, Louv, Bodner, Guns, & Stahl, 2009).

Over the past decade, society has become so focused on technology that it has become disconnected from a nature-reference. Adults and children appear to be more indoor- activity oriented and less engaged with the natural world. We have become increasingly uncomfortable in wild places and more comfortable indoors (Phenice & Griffore, 2003). This effect has influenced children, who have become more sedentary, leading to a myriad of health problems such as: anxiety, depression, and obesity (Charles et. al, 2009; Louv, 2006; Rivkin, 2014). Colley, Didier, Janssen, Craig, Clarke, and Tremblay, (2011) in their report, *Physical Activity of Canadian Children and Youth*, stated that children in Canada spend an average of 6-7.5 hours a day in front of a screen. This is alarming, given that the American Pediatrics Association has pointed out that screen time has no educational value for children under the age of 2 years, and recommends one hour of screen time per day for young children and 2 hours per day for older children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015). More importantly, this sedentary behaviour is creating health problems for Canadian children and youth, especially obesity which affects 25% of the population.

Torquati & Ernst (2013) found that by bringing children to 'wilder' settings on more than one occasion, they gained experience and skill in self-regulation. For example, when a group of children were brought to a setting that featured water, the children quickly learned to explore it with caution to avoid falling in or getting cold and wet. The more often they visited the water, the more they were able to explore its

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properties. Exposure to natural light and sunshine is essential for mental and physical health as vitamin D can only be absorbed when skin is exposed for a sufficient amount of time (Vieth, 2010). When children are able to access safe natural spaces outdoors, they are less likely to have low vitamin D levels (Florez, Martinez, Chakra, Strickman-Stein, & Levis, 2007) and they are more likely to engage in gross-motor activities.

As well as the physical benefits of outdoor play, enhanced sensory and cognitive development and mental health benefits have been documented (Tandon, Saelens, Zhou, Kerr, & Christakis, 2013). Fjortoft and Sageie (2000), found that playing in natural settings with diverse features and vegetation improved children's social play skills, ability to concentrate, and overall physical fitness. These children also had fewer illnesses than those who regularly played in an urban playground. Fjortoft & Sageie (2000) referred to a hidden curriculum where by playing in nature children learn about nature in ways that may not be measurable but that benefit their overall understanding of the natural world. Likewise, Warden (2010), founder of the nature kindergartens and forest schools in Scotland, posited that when children play and have positive experiences in nature, their love of nature grows and stays with them into adulthood.

When Chawla (2006) surveyed environmental leaders about what influenced them to be passionate about protecting the environment, most recalled a childhood spent largely outdoors with a significant adult who demonstrated respect for the environment. Richard Louv (2006), an advocate for re-introducing children to nature, writes about the many benefits this will have for them. As well as those previously identified, in 2003 environmental psychologists at Cornell University reported that being

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near nature protects children from the harmful effects of chronic stress (Wells and Evans, 2003). Wells and Evans (2003) discovered that children who are near nature more often have a higher sense of self-worth than those who are not and scored lower than did children in less natural settings for anxiety and depression. In arguing for increased exposure for children to more natural areas for play, the implications for child mental health are significant.

Having a place in nature also helps children to develop their spiritual self (Sobel, 1993). An outdoor hiding place away from adults can have positive effects in the development of a child's identity. Sobel discovered that children's outdoor 'hideaways' allow them the space they need to connect with their inner selves, and to draw upon in times of stress. He noted that given the opportunity, children in almost every culture will construct spaces for themselves away from their homes and caregivers. Rivkin (2014) expands upon the benefits of being connected to natural spaces to include other aspects of nature, such as animals and their care, and gardening. Children who may not feel accepted by their peers will often feel acceptance from animals. Caring for animals and plants can help children to develop social skills and a sense of competence. In turn, learning to garden or care for an animal helps children develop skills that can be transferred to other areas of development, such as working cooperatively with others to achieve a desired outcome. Society benefits when children have improved health, from learning to appreciate and enjoy nature and wild places. The benefits are carried forward into their adult years. Adults who care about natural spaces will work towards protecting them (Rivkin, 2014; Warden, 2010). Researchers at Cornell University have

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determined that when children are able to engage in free-play activities in the natural outdoors before the age of 11, they are much more likely to care about the environment as adults (Cornell University, 2006).

A growing body of research (Charles, Louv, Bodner, Guns, & Stahl, 2009) indicate multiple benefits to children and adults of being in nature. By being, experiencing, and playing in nature, children might develop a meaningful relationship with nature. ECEs need to have a firm understanding of the benefits of both outdoor play, and play in nature (Torquati & Ernst, 2013). They also might need to advocate and educate families about the significance of play in natural environments because parental beliefs and attitudes can have an effect on children's level of participation in outdoor play. Some parents do not want their children to go outside when it is cold or wet, or to a place that is away from the child care facility. Culture can affect how parents view outdoor play. New immigrants to Canada may not have experience with outdoor play in Canadian weather and so may choose for their children to remain indoors. They may not understand what clothing is needed for outdoor play in the Canadian climate (Peritz, 2014). Children from non-western countries are also at higher risk for obesity when they move to western countries (Rivkin, 2014; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Early childhood educators need to consider how culture can impact the perception of outdoor play. When not a priority, busy parents can forget to supply key clothing items for outdoor play, and those with limited financial resources might choose not to spend their scarce resources on the varied clothing needed in cooler climates like in Canada.

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Centre directors should consider how to advocate for outdoor nature play to parents and teachers. Information about its importance in any type of weather needs to be shared with parents, staff, and children. Directors may even want to consider allocating funds to supply waterproof gear to children and teachers. They could challenge public policy to ensure that construction of new childcare centres include doors leading directly to the outdoor play area, along with a transition area for putting on and taking off outdoor clothing. This would ensure that children have fewer transitions on their way outdoors, allowing one teacher to immediately take children onto the playground. The other teacher would be close behind with the remaining children, who would have a view of their peers playing outdoors to motivate them to get dressed.

### **Natural Play Logistics**

In urban settings, the opportunity to provide children with experiences in nature becomes more challenging. Due to fears of litigation, playground design in the 80's and 90's overemphasized the need for safety in an attempt to eliminate the risk of accidents (Tierney, 2011). The emphasis became focused on providing safe and protective surfaces for children's gross motor play and eliminating the risk of injury (Tierney, 2011). Activities such as tree and rock-climbing became viewed as too 'risky', and therefore playground structures were designed to eliminate injury (Dietze & Kashin, 2012; Keeler, 2008; White, 2004).

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Sandseter (2007) has argued that the natural environment with its variable landscapes provides children with opportunities for risky play, vital for their emotional development. The task then becomes locating more natural spaces to visit on outings, rather than sticking to more 'safe' playgrounds. However, adults are often uncomfortable bringing children to places that do not have bathroom facilities, fences, or well-marked paths. If they are uncomfortable with being around dirt, plants, animals, and bodies of water, they might project this discomfort on to the children, and their outings to wilder locations will likely be limited. Compounding this issue is the matter of visits to wilder places. These difficulties mean that early childhood educators have to be highly motivated to provide children with nature experiences. If they do not see the benefit of such areas, they are more likely to go to places that are considered safer, such as playgrounds or indoor attractions where children are amused in ways that are comfortable for adults. Many adults have forgotten or have never experienced the joys of playing in places that offer endless possibilities, such as a wooded areas, ponds, and mud-puddles and therefore, they seek places that offer limited possibilities and challenges for children. When early childhood educators learn the joys of play in nature, they can re-create that joy for the children in their care (Maynard & Waters, 2007).

The community of Colchester and East Hants, together with the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, conducted the East Hants Outdoor Play Project (Personal Communication, Laura Beth Macpherson, East Hants Outdoor Play Network, February 10, 2016). This project, the first of its kind in Nova Scotia, enabled the development of recommendations for furthering the creation of an early childhood



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outdoor play strategy for the province of Nova Scotia. These strategies are aimed at increasing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes surrounding the quality of outdoor play during all four seasons of Nova Scotia. From their work with the early learning centres in East Hants, twenty four recommendations were listed that would facilitate early childhood educators increasing the quality and quantity of children's outdoor play experiences. Seven of these recommendations included are considered critical for the development of an early childhood outdoor play strategy. These are:

1. Providing early childhood educators with the training and support needed to offer quality outdoor play experiences for young children;
2. Identifying outdoor play professionals to deliver training to early childhood educators;
3. Developing policies to support quality outdoor play experiences;
4. Developing partnerships among early childhood development stakeholders invested in the health of young children and outdoor play;
5. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Health and Wellness collaborating on the development of an outdoor play framework for the early years;
6. Funding for more research on outdoor play;
7. Assigning staff at the Department of Health and Wellness to ensure that these recommendations are followed. These recommendations reflect the need for ECEs

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across Nova Scotia to receive training on the significance of quality outdoor play in the lives of young children, and ways they can provide such experiences.

Training for early childhood educators in Nova Scotia who wish to learn more about adding nature to the curriculum in a supportive setting, limited to mostly learning through one's own research, or attending a 'forest school practitioner' course. These options represent two extremes of training: One is accessible but isolated from other early childhood educators wanting to embark on the same journey; the other is costly, with the closest training being in Ontario. While it offers extensive training and experience working with children in nature, the associated costs of travel, accommodations, tuition, etc. make it inaccessible for most Nova Scotian early childhood educators. In addition, the time commitment of at least eight months to become certified, is unachievable for those who must work full-time (<http://www.forestschoolcanada.ca/home/practitioners-course>). Because the benefits of play in nature are so numerous, more professional development needs to be constructed in this area for all early childhood educators. The effect will be that children will get an increase of outdoor play in more natural areas, something children in today's society truly need.

## Chapter Two

### Workshop Rationale

According to recent research (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000; Rivkin, 2014; Louv, 2006), there has been a steady decline in the amount of outdoor play children are experiencing in western society. Adults are also going outside less frequently. While the benefits of outdoor play are well documented, such benefits are increased when exposure to nature is added. The more natural elements that occur in a play space, the more the health benefits to children are increased. Young children are not exposed to nature as their grandparents and parents were, due to factors such as increased screen-time, urban migration, over scheduling, and fear/safety issues. Children in Canada are spending an average of 6-7.5 hours a day in front of a screen (Colley, Didier, Janssen, Craig, Clarke, & Tremblay, 2011) To compensate for this trend, early childhood educators (ECEs) could provide young children with a variety of outdoor, nature experiences. However, many ECEs dislike going outdoors themselves. Teachers of young children can learn about and share the beauty of nature and its many health benefits. One way of doing this is to have ECEs participate in a series of workshops that emphasize the joys and benefits of outdoor play for young children's overall development. These workshops would be designed to make outdoor play exciting, natural, and viable, even for ECEs who don't typically enjoy the outdoors. There would also be an educational component focusing on why going outside to natural spaces is vital to the growth and development of young children. Workshops would have an activity component that encourages ECEs to connect with each other as they try new

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experiences in the outdoors, both with and without children. Hopefully, a gradual approach with ECEs who take the workshop series will result in a balanced appreciation of nature and willingness to embrace natural environments as part of a holistic curriculum.

The benefits of play in nature for children have been well documented (Rivkin, 2014), as has the impact of over- exposure to screen time (Louv, 2006). Giving children the freedom and skills to play in natural settings has many benefits for their long-term health. Children are dependent on their caregivers to help them experience play in nature. If the adults who care for children dislike the outdoors, or are unaware of how beneficial it is for children to have these experiences, they may choose to implement an indoor curriculum with outdoor time spent on “safe” playgrounds. My goal is to develop a workshop series to help ECEs in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) become comfortable, familiar, and competent at bringing children to natural areas. In addition, the workshops would provide an opportunity for ECEs to learn from each other, share ideas, and take the initiative to devise activities for play and exploration in the outdoors.

### **Outdoor Play Workshop Series**

The Workshop Series used an integrated approach to enhance participants’ understanding of the practical and theoretical underpinnings of natural play experiences in early childhood settings. Participants draw on their experience, knowledge, and openness to explore, learn, and experience nature. There are six workshop sessions spread over approximately six months. The sessions are held at different learning

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centers and all involve both class time and outdoor activities and experiences. Sessions are organized so that participants have opportunities to share ideas and information, provide feedback on homework assignments completed since the last session, and to actively explore and reflect on their experiences in natural settings. Throughout the process, participants develop a portfolio, documenting their perceptions, new learnings, information gained from the instructor, fellow professional, articles, websites, and their own experiences and activities.

This workshop series should enable ECEs to become confident about bringing their curriculum outdoors. Each of the six sessions are three weeks apart to give participants opportunities to complete homework assignments. At the beginning of each session, homework assignments will be shared with the other participants. A Facebook group will be created so that participants can communicate with one another and myself between sessions. At the beginning of the workshop series, participants will be given a folder which they can keep their homework assignments, articles, activities, and resources. At the end of the workshop series, each participant should have a valuable and workable resource portfolio that will encourage them to become more nature- oriented in their programming.

After the series of workshops have been completed, I hope that the ECEs who attended become more open to seeing the outdoors as a source of pleasure for themselves and the children they care for. As a result of this workshop series, participants will:

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- Understand why time in nature is vital for children and adults
- Develop an awareness of what causes discomfort for themselves in natural settings with children, and how that can be overcome.
- Create goals for themselves related to spending time outdoors, and share their goals on a Face book page.
- Participate in outdoor activities that can be used with the children in their programs.
- Form relationships with one another, so that experiences, successes, and challenges can be shared in a supportive environment.
- Be willing to share their experiences with other adults, and document their learning, for the purpose of educating and inspiring other adults regarding outdoor play benefits.
- Have knowledge about how to dress for successful outdoor times with children  
Have fun and experience success in the natural environment.

It is my hope to offer this workshop series to ECEs around Halifax, tailoring each to the natural spaces in their local area. It would be excellent to offer this workshop series to ECEs in rural areas as well. Rural areas provide unique opportunities and challenges to bringing children to nature.

### **Significance of the Workshop Series**

ECEs need to change their practice to accommodate changes in society. By being aware of social changes, ECEs can create learning environments that complement the

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lives of children within their family unit. Many children in childcare have families with restrictions on time and resources. Families may not have time to spend outdoors with their children every day because of obligations from work and school. What was socially relevant 20 years ago has changed dramatically. Today, children have access to a wide variety of educational software and television, but very limited access to unstructured outdoor play. ECEs can help children and families adjust to the changes in society by being aware of the needs of children in our current social state. Children are spending huge amounts of time in front of a screen, and they are experiencing many health problems as a result. ECEs can plan a socially relevant curriculum that would address children's lack of unstructured play in nature. ECEs can provide children with unstructured play opportunities in nature, but this requires teachers having to learn a new way of programming. Twenty years ago, an hour-long story and song time, where all children are seated, may have been relevant. Now, we need to think that such activities come at the expense of unstructured outdoor free-play that children desperately need.

We are at a crossroads where, as a society, we need to decide how we want to live. Do we embrace technology regardless of the effects it has to our health and well-being, or do we take a critical look at how technology is being used by ourselves and our children? Technology has encroached upon our lives in good ways and in harmful ways. I believe that nature and technology can co-exist as long as we are aware of its use and the consequences of that use. I hope that my workshop series will gently ease ECEs into a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking includes providing children with more

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outdoor opportunities in natural environments. Outdoor play in nature needs to be given priority in the ECE classroom of today.



**Chapter Three**  
**Workshop Series**

**Location:** Local area of ECEs registered for workshop

**Session 1/6: Introduction**

**Each participant will receive:**

(  
-A folder for handouts, notes, and assignments

-A name tag (A wood “cookie” with a hole in it, some twine, and sharpies so they can make their own natural name-tag. Include some wooden beads as well.)

**10 min:** Introduction and Welcome, Workshop outline

- Welcome participants and state the main purpose of the workshop series, which is to increase the comfort level of ECEs being outdoors.
- Overview of workshop
- I will introduce myself, then ask the participants to introduce themselves and say where they work and what age group they work with.
- **Rationale:** Becoming more comfortable outdoors will enable ECEs to broaden their curriculum to include more outside time for the children they care for.

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**10 min icebreaker:** Recalling your memories of nature from childhood: On a piece of paper write down your memory of a particular time/activity that you spent outside as a child. How old were you? Where were you? What was around you? What could you smell, hear, taste, feel, or sense? Why was this special to you? Have participants ball up their paper and throw them to someone across the room. Volunteers can read the responses out loud. After each response is read, ask participants to identify themselves if they choose to do so.

**Rationale:** Recalling a pleasant/unpleasant memory from childhood and sharing it with others will aid participants in connecting with one another. These memories are a starting point for discussion surrounding our own attitudes and emotional connection to nature.

**5 min:** Have group go outside with clipboards and pens unless the weather is too inclement.

**10 min survey:** Have participants choose a comfortable spot to sit with their clipboard.

Give out Survey with the questions:

1. What do you like about being outside?
2. What don't you like about being outside?
3. What are your experiences with children in nature?
4. What are your fears?
5. What don't you like about bringing children outside?

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6. What do you like?

7. What do you hope to gain upon completing this workshop series?

Gather participants back into a circle. Have participants share question #7 with the group. Have participants submit their responses. Ask participants to indicate whether or not they are ok with sharing their responses with the group next week.

**Rationale:** This will help provide information about the participants' level of comfort in the outdoors, and also frame the content of future sessions.

**20 min:** For all sessions, participants should dress for the weather. Unless the weather is inclement, we will be going outside where the ground may be wet and/or muddy.

Therefore, participants will need the following clothing and equipment to fully participate in this workshop series:

- Rain boots
- Waterproof rain pants
- Waterproof rain coat
- Fleece jacket or warm sweater
- Sun hat and warm hat
- Sunscreen
- Sneakers or hiking shoes
- Water bottle
- Camera (Phone cameras are great)
- Access to a computer

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- Umbrella (optional)

Have equipment items written on cue cards. Have participants each choose one card.

They have to act out to the others the item on their card (like charades). The rest of the participants have to guess the item and why it would be needed.

Most of these items can be purchased inexpensively at Value Village, Canadian Tire, or Walmart. For more durable outdoor wear Mountain Equipment Co-op or the Trail Shop in Halifax are excellent options.

**Rationale:** Having appropriate outdoor clothing will be invaluable, as participants increase their level of comfort being in the outdoors. When adults have the necessary clothing to be comfortable outdoors, they will be able to stay outside for longer periods of time and will be less reluctant to go outside. This fun activity will help to reinforce this information.

**15 min:** Outdoor clothing throughout the year.

Give handout 'Dressing for the outdoors: Parents information pack'. This handout can be found at the following link:

[http://www.muddyfaces.info/muddydownloads/clothing/dressing\\_for\\_the\\_outdoors\\_parents\\_information.pdf](http://www.muddyfaces.info/muddydownloads/clothing/dressing_for_the_outdoors_parents_information.pdf) . Have examples of each clothing item for adults and children. Provide examples of places to purchase these items. (Value Village, Frenchy's; Canadian Tire, Walmart, Mountain Equipment Co-op, The Trail Shop).

**Rationale:** Being physically uncomfortable outdoors is a huge deterrent for

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individuals who prefer to be indoors. By dressing appropriately, this discomfort can be eliminated or greatly reduced for adults and children.

**5 min:** Definition of 'nature' and where to find it (Torquati & Ernst, 2013) power point, or, if outdoors, read aloud:

Natural environments are those that contain many natural elements found in the local ecosystem such as plants, animals, rocks, water, and insects. There is a range of natural environments, from those that are nearly wild, such as a nature center, to those that contain a few human-made materials and surfaces such as slides, balls, or concrete, to those that contain a mix of many human-made materials and natural elements" (p.192).

**Rationale:** Giving the definition of nature will provide a framework for participants to evaluate their outdoor environment.

**5 min:** Pass out the New Yorker article: "*Just in Time for Spring*", by Ellis Weiner (2011), which can be found online at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/28/just-in-time-for-spring>. It is a humorous article about going outside and what a novel experience it is for people who tend to stay indoors. Have volunteers read each section out loud. If there is no one who wants to read it, read the article to the participants.

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**Rationale:** This article summarizes the overall theme of the workshop series with humour. The article allows participants to laugh at how indoor-oriented society has become.

**5 min:** Participants go back indoors

**10 min:** What does the research say about why children need nature?

**Power point presentation:** Facts about nature and the benefits to human health.

Give participants a copy of Torquati & Ernst's (2013) article: *Beyond the walls:*

*Conceptualizing Natural Environments as "Third Educators"*. Participants

should read this before the next session and to complete one of the homework assignments.

**Rationale:** Providing participants with current research about nature experiences and human health benefits may help motivate them to choose outdoor activities more often.

**5 min:** Where to go in local area to experience nature. Have group share their favourite natural spaces in the area. Record the responses on flipchart paper.

**Rationale:** By sharing each other's favourite natural spaces, this will increase awareness and knowledge of local areas to enjoy nature.

**10 min:** Overview of the local area trails/natural spaces via powerpoint:

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- Have a diagram of the map of the trails
- Have pictures of local natural spaces and the features they contain
- Have detailed instructions on how to get there (bus routes; walking routes)

**Rationale:** A brief overview of the trail we are about to walk on with pictures, to spark the interest of the participants. By having a preview of the trail, participants will know what to expect. This will help to increase the confidence of the participants.

**10 min:** Go to local Trailhead

**20 min:** Walk and enjoy each other's company on the trail. Stop after 15 -20 min.

**Rationale:** This will be our first experience as a group in a natural setting. I would like it to be fun and relaxing.

**15-25 min:** Walk back to trail head without talking. Observing the beauty of the forest, take a picture with your camera of up to five things on the trail that have meaning to you in some way. Meet back at the trail head.

Ask the participants: "What did you observe on your walk?" and, "Did you notice a difference between the 2 experiences (talking vs. silence)?"

**Homework:** For next session, participants are going to post their photos on the Facebook group page, with a description of the photo and why they chose to take the photo.

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**Rationale:** The purpose of this activity is to give participants the opportunity to focus on the positive and beautiful aspects of a natural space in their area. The first part of the walk allows the participants to socially engage with one another on a trail. This will increase the level of comfort the ECEs have in a natural setting. The second part of the walk, the participants have to focus on their surroundings mindfully, by walking silently and taking photographs. By uploading their photos on the Facebook page, participants will be communicating to each other what they found to be meaningful. This will begin communication between members of the workshop series and myself as the facilitator. Weekly updates can be made by participants when homework assignments are completed between sessions.

**10 min:** Homework for next session:

-Post your trail photos to the Facebook page: "Nature for ECEs Workshop Series".

Include in your post a brief description of why the photo is meaningful to you.

-Post a picture of yourself doing something that is related to the goal(s) you

would like to achieve upon completion of the workshop series. Share your

goal(s) in a post on the workshop series Facebook page.

**Rationale:** Each participant will have different goals they would like to achieve by the end of the workshop series. Posting these goals on the Face book page will help the participants recognize common interests within the group. (The homework for next session will be related to our goals.



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-Read the article by Torquati & Ernst (2013) Have 2 trivia questions along with the correct answers to ask the group for next week that are related to the article.

We will be having a trivia contest next session.

**Rationale:** This will help participants learn about why the natural environment is so vital to the development of children in a fun atmosphere. This article was selected because it contains important information related to the importance of play in nature, and reasons why it may not be happening for children in child care settings.

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**Session 2/6: Exploring the 'Wild'****Meet at local indoor location**

**5 min:** Greetings and housekeeping items.

**10 min:** Review of findings from the survey the participants completed last session. Play the "Comfort Level Game (Heidi Verheul: Wild Child Forest School, personal communication, September 21, 2015). Make 2 large circles, one inside the other. The center circle is smaller than the outer, larger circle. The center circle represents our comfort zone, where we feel the safest. The second circle represents things that we find challenging but doable. Outside of the second circle represents things that make us very uncomfortable and may cause us to give up or panic. While reading the responses to last week's survey (and adding some more responses as well), have participants place themselves in the area they feel best represents their feelings about that statement.

**Rationale:** Reviewing the findings from last week will help participants see the similarities or differences they share. This will lead into the 'goal setting' activity that comes next.

**30 min:** Making a plan to reach our goals: If there are participants who share similar goals, have them sit together. Each group will have a 'goal setting' sheet. Have them write their goal(s) at the top of the page. Between now and the next four sessions, what steps can they do to help reach their goal(s)? Participants will record their ideas on the worksheet, and then share with the group.

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**15 min:** Trivia Game: Break group into two teams. Each team has a sound making device. Each team takes a turn asking the other team a trivia question. If someone on the team knows the answer, they run up and grab the sound making device. The team member who grabs the device first and sounds it must answer the trivia question correctly. If they answer correctly they earn a point for their team. When all the questions have been asked, the team with the most correct answers wins!

**Rationale:** This is a fun way to review the important information in the article. While participants engage in this friendly competition they will be working as a team to win the game. This will facilitate the relationships among the group members, making it more likely that they will support one another in their goals of becoming more outdoor and nature oriented in their practice with children.

**15 min.** Depart for local trail head

**40 min:** Scavenger Hunts are a great way to explore wilder areas with children in a non-threatening and fun way. Choose an area that you are comfortable exploring with children, and try one out!

Identifying local Flora and Fauna Scavenger Hunt! Using the Scavenger Hunt Sheet Provided (Appendix D), find the items on the sheet and take a picture of them. How could you adapt this activity for children, while ensuring that the materials they collect are not rare or endangered?

Some examples of scavenger hunts for children:

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-Find the Rainbow Scavenger Hunt (Preschool): Have 7 pieces of felt or material that are the 7 colors of the rainbow. The children each have to find one thing that matches each color. How could this then be developed into play?

-Hidden Objects Scavenger Hunt (Toddlers or preschoolers): Hide materials made of natural items on the playground for the children to find that are related to the season: Wooden eggs for spring, pinecones and shells for summer, chestnuts and acorns for fall, colored ice cubes in the winter. The list is endless!

-Specific Flora and Fauna Scavenger Hunt, Attributes Scavenger Hunt (School Aged): Using a Nature guide, like McClosky & Kennedy's (2012) *Nature Guide to Atlantic Canada*, encourage children to find a list of natural specimens, and put them in a bag. Nothing poisonous or endangered of course!

**5 min Discussion:** What should you do if the children prefer to play, rather than doing the scavenger hunt?

**Rationale:** Having a structured activity to follow on an outdoor excursion may give ECEs confidence to try an outdoor excursion. If the children are playing instead of doing the structured activity, the children are still gaining many benefits. This discussion is to have the participants consider that the children may just want to explore an area without a structured activity. For those who worry that the children will become bored in a natural setting with 'nothing to do', the scavenger hunt activity gives them a reason to go in nature with children.

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**30 min:** Play in Natural Spaces: Divide group into the age-groups they work with:

Infant/toddlers, Preschoolers, or School-aged. Using the provided loose parts, have participants imagine how children would use the area according to their age group.

What kind of things do you see the children doing there? How would you ensure the children were safe? What precautions would you take? What things could you bring that would enhance the play of the children? Each group write down their ideas in their field notebooks, share with the group their ideas after 10 min. Have prepared some 'loose parts' as examples for participants to use to stimulate their ideas:

- Waterplay materials like buckets, scoops, and various containers.
- Shovels, rakes, cars, and trucks
- Small dolls
- Tree blocks and 'cookies'
- Rope and string
- Small toy animals
- Pieces of wood of varying sizes and shapes
- Stones
- Pinecones
- Acorns and chestnuts

**10 min:** Homework for next session:

-Post a photo on Facebook related to meeting your goal(s) for the workshop series.

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-Do one scavenger hunt with children outdoors. Write down your activity and how it went. What worked? What did not work? Be prepared to share your activity with the group.

-Bring a book that explores a nature theme that can be shared with children. Books are a wonderful way of provoking discussion and learning with children.

Next session we will explore the benefits of mud and dirt play. Wear clothes that can get dirty! Also bring loose parts from nature that can be used for a mud exploration activity. For example: Stones, shells, twigs, seeds, flowers, grasses, etc.

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**Session 3/6: Exploring Earth and Soil****Meet at local indoor location**

**30 min:** Sharing of homework assignments:

- Face book photos (power point) related to goals. Share with the group what you did to meet your personal goals.
- Scavenger hunts: Share what you did and how it went.

**30 min:** Books that explore the themes of nature and outdoor play. Have volunteers share their favourite children's literature on this topic. Have books on display for the remainder of this session for the participants to examine at their leisure. Bring in your own examples of books that would provoke learning and discovery. For example: *The Gruffalo*, by Julia Donaldson (1999).

**10 min: Power point:** Why dirt is good for children and adults. PowerPoint summarizes the report by the National Wildlife Federation (2012) called: The Dirt on Dirt. Retrieved from: [https://www.nwf.org/pdf/Be%20Out%20There/Dirt\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](https://www.nwf.org/pdf/Be%20Out%20There/Dirt_Report_2012.pdf)

- Share CBC news article by North by Northwest's Sharyl Mackay (2015): Harmful bacteria build-up in children may be a product of not letting kids be kids (CBC news, Sharyl Mackay, 2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/harmful-bacteria-buildup-in-children-may-be-a-product-of-not-letting-kids-be-kids-1.3094165>

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**Rationale:** Some adults believe that children should stay clean in any environment. By understanding that experiences where children get dirty are also valuable, ECEs may allow for more of these experiences. This information is also valuable when communicating with parents, who often have the same concerns as ECEs.

**20 min:** We will answer the question: How can dirt and soil be explored in your curriculum?

- Have group break into groups of 4. Give each group a piece of flipchart paper and markers. Have each group discuss how different curriculum areas can be explored with mud and dirt being the inspiration.

**Rationale:** A first step to doing something new or different can be exchanging thoughts and ideas about the topic. The purpose of this brainstorming session is to consider the idea that allowing children to explore and get dirty can be a valuable experience.

**Go outside to playground! (Stations)** Break participants into 3 groups, then rotate groups so

each gets a turn at one of the stations.

**1) 15 min:** Making Mud Pies: Exploring the element of earth (Sensory play in a mud kitchen).

-How to make a mud kitchen: Interesting and exciting things to include.

-Mud pie contest using many materials from nature! Provide participants with containers, soil, water, and the various loose parts participants were asked to



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bring last session.

**5 min:** Please share your creation with the group. Did you enjoy this activity?

Why or why not? How can you entice children who dislike being dirty into an activity like this?

**Rationale:** Participants will be asked to create, not as a child would, but as something they as adults find pleasing. We will be tapping into everyone's inner artist, exploring the earth as a medium. The goal is to have participants experience play for themselves, and then describe what they did and how they felt to the other participants.

Using loose parts in play: Share the free online resource: *Nature Play at Home*

(National Wildlife Federation and Natural Learning Initiative, 2012) Which can be downloaded for free at:

[https://naturalearning.org/download/Nature\\_Play\\_at\\_Home04-15.pdf](https://naturalearning.org/download/Nature_Play_at_Home04-15.pdf)

**2) 15 Minutes:** Children and Gardening Go Hand in Hand

At this station, participants will plant 2 items:

- 1) A sunflower seed: using materials provided plant a sunflower seed following the illustrated directions. The sunflowers will be planted along a fence at Beech Tree Academy.

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- 2) A petunia in a planter: Participants will prepare planters with rocks and soil, and then each participant will plant a petunia transplant in the planter.

**Rationale:** Some adults have never planted anything in their lives. This activity is intended to show how simple gardening can be, and to give participants confidence to try it on their own.

- 3) **15 minutes:** Exciting Investigations of Critters that Live in Soil

Discussion: Children are often very excited to find any living creature when outdoors. This includes spiders, worms, and earwigs. What is the best way we can share a sense of wonder and respect for these creatures with the children? How do we honor children's excitement while working through our own fears? What are some ways we can investigate living things that do not harm the environment or the creature?

Find 3 'critters' in the grass or soil. Using google on your hand-held device, try to identify the critters..

**Rationale:** This is intended to be a fun and hands-on activity. I will provide gloves for those who don't want to touch the soil. After participating in these three activities, participants will have an idea of how to prepare for experiences like this. This will serve as a starting point for our next discussion.

**10 min:** The value of documentation. Slide show with examples of the kinds of documentation you could use to begin a more nature-based program. Discuss how

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participants can use documentation of their experiences during this workshop in their own classrooms.

**Rationale:** Documentation can be a powerful tool in communicating our knowledge and intentions to parents and coworkers. Learning to use documentation in a nature based program can inform parents, children, and coworkers of the pedagogical outcomes we are achieving.

**20 min:** Celebrate International Mud Day (June 29)! A great way to begin the process of natural play. While everyday should be mud day, some programs need to introduce this concept carefully to ensure that families and staff are prepared for these experiences on a daily basis. See Website: <http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/international-mud-day/> for more information.

-What kind of activities could you do? Record ideas on flipchart.

-Documentation for parents/Documentation for children: Involving parents on the journey to a more nature-based curriculum. Share what one centre did that helped parents and staff to get excited about getting dirty!!

**Discussion-**Celebrating getting dirty by honoring everyone's needs: How can we make it easy for parents/staff to engage in dirt play? Record Ideas.

**Rationale:** Sometimes you need a fun event to spark interest in something new or controversial. By advertising a fun event, such as 'mud day' using documentation,

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advanced warning, and preparation, parents and staff are more likely to see this as something enjoyable and beneficial to the development of their child.

**10 min:** Homework:

- Post a photo on Facebook related to you working towards your goal
- Provide children with materials that encourage them to dig in the dirt, or create mud.

Document what the children do with the materials with photos and text. How did

you involve the parents in this activity? What was their response?

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**Session 4/6: Exploring Water Outdoors with Children, Let them Jump in the Puddles!****Meet at local trail head or natural space**

**5 min:** Walk to local body of water

**10 min: Mindfulness Activity**

- ‘Sit Spots’ activity: Lead participants towards the stream and guide them to their own space. This should be scouted out beforehand. Have them sit quietly for 5 min, listening to the various sounds around them. After 5 minutes, everyone shares one sound that they heard. This activity is also called “Magic Spots” (Warner, 2015)
- Ask participants to share how they felt during this activity. Did they like this activity or not? Why or why not?
- Ask participants: In what way does your experience with nature effect how you felt during the ‘Sit Spots’ activity?

**Rationale:** This is a simple mindfulness activity that can be done with children ages 3 and up in a natural setting. Each child has their own little space that is theirs only for several minutes. With practice, children can sit for upwards of 10 minutes in their spaces listening to the sounds of nature. (Bonnie Davison, Victoria Nature School, personal communication, May 9, 2015) This activity can be done every time a space is visited by the children. Bonnie Davison stresses that children need to be given the opportunity to visit the same natural space again and again, to become connected

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with that space. This activity gives children a connection to a small space within the natural setting. Adults can do this simple activity with the children by having the children choose their own space, and practicing sitting there for 30 seconds at a time, listening to the sounds around them. They can gradually increase the amount of time they and the children sit and listen to nature. This is a great activity for adults to connect to nature as well. Many of us have to learn, or relearn how to listen to nature; how to quiet ourselves.

**45 min:** Water exploration and risk management. Talk about how to do a benefit/risk assessment (Warden, 2012). Benefit/Risk assessments are done when there is a perceived level of risk to an activity, but the activity has many benefits for learning. By doing a benefit/risk assessment, you are lowering the level of potential risk before starting the activity.

Have participants group themselves into pairs. Give each pair a clipboard with a worksheet that has the following questions on it:

1. What are some of the natural features of this area?
2. What might children want to explore in this area?
3. List 5 play opportunities for children in this area.
4. List 5 safety concerns for children playing in this area.
5. Develop a 'risk management' plan for one safety concern on the back of your worksheet. Include the following:

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- Potential hazard
- Level of risk, how dangerous is it if no safety precautions are taken?  
(Low/medium/high)
- Safety precautions that could lower the level of risk
- Revised level of risk, when you take precautions does the level of risk change?  
(Low/medium/high)
- In what ways can the children be involved in following safety precautions?

Participants have 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. We will take 25 minutes to go over each pair's responses.

Discuss with the group the value of visiting the same natural space with children again and again. The more times children visit a space, the more they will feel connected to that space. Repeated visits also help children improve their experience and skill level in that space. For example, visiting bodies of water, children become less likely to fall into water as they learn to become more cautious (Kelly & White, 2012). Adults will experience similar benefits. The more a space is visited, the more familiar it will become. This will help adults improve their competency in this space, allowing them to increase their comfort level and do more accurate risk assessments and planning for the interests of the children. How are repeat visits helpful for adults as well?

**Rationale:** This activity is an exercise in managing risk with children in natural areas. By giving thought to what risks are present in natural areas, then devising a plan to manage those risks, the anxiety participants feel when taking children to natural spaces will be

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lessened. Sometimes, adults are overly confident when taking children to natural spaces, and this can lead to children being injured. Upon completion of this activity, participants will be better prepared to take children outdoors in nature.

**Break:** Meet afterwards at local area workshop setting

**30 min:** Incorporating Small Bodies of Water into Play. Puddle Exploration!

- How to make a puddle when none are available (Warden, 2013)

Have participants move into groups of three. Assign each group an age of child play experience that involves puddles. Have participants create their own puddles using water that is provided if no natural puddles are present. Provide plenty of open ended materials so participants can use their imaginations. Have each group present their ideas to the rest of the group.

Ideas for material to provide:

- Sticks
- Acorns and pinecones
- Chestnuts
- Flowers
- Shells
- Coconut shells
- Stones of various size
- Wooden logs of various sizes



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- Leaves of various sizes

**Rationale:** Traditionally, ECEs use 'water tables' to allow children to explore water indoors. This activity is designed to show ECEs the 'potential of a puddle' (Warden, 2013). Puddles are a great place for safe water exploration that is outdoors and already present in the natural environment. This activity is to assist ECEs to think outside their normal experiences for a more natural way to present water exploration.

**10 min:** Homework for next session:

-Post a photo of yourself on Facebook doing something related to your goal.

-Plan a experience for playing in puddles with the children in your

classroom. Implement the activity, then write it down and be ready to share with

the group for next week.



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**Session 5/6: Air and Fire: Safety and Risk Exploration.****Meet at local area workshop setting**

**30 min:** Discussion of last sessions' homework assignments:

Slideshow of Facebook photos

1. Activities with puddles, what did everyone do? How did the activities go? Share activities.

**Making Kites Challenge:** Helping children to play with Air!

**10 min:** Do you know how wind is created? What questions can you ask children to find out their ideas about wind?

**45 min:** Kite Making, from Simple to Complex. A windy day is a wonderful opportunity to explore the properties of air. Taking children outside on a windy day with nothing but some string tied to a silk scarf is magical and fun. Have participants group themselves into pairs. The challenge is for participants to make a kite that flies with the materials provided. Materials will include: newspaper, tissue paper, glue, tape, string, fishing line, fabric scraps, and wooden dowels. They have 45 minutes to complete this activity. Ask participants to consider the effect the materials may have on the environment if they were to be left behind after use.

**30 min:** Go outside and fly your kites! (If windy) Did they work? Why or why not? If there is no wind, how can you explore this concept with children? How do children explore the concept of air and wind, without adults providing the answers directly?

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Provide each participant with a silk scarf and a length of string, can you make something that will fill with air and fly behind you when you run?

What are some other ways air can be explored with children?

**Rationale:** These are simple and fun activities to explore air with children or adults. The purpose of this activity is for the participants to play, laugh, and explore themselves. By experimenting with materials to create things that fly, adults have the opportunity to experience the fun and joy through their own perspective. Air and wind are all around us and it is fascinating to hear children's ideas about where air comes from.

**45 min:** *Leave No Trace Canada* volunteer presentation: How to Build a Fire Safely for Humans and the Environment.

Discussion: Fire, can it be investigated safely with children?

With the group, do a benefit/risk assessment for exploring a lit candle with young children. Ask the following questions:

1. What are the potential benefits to exploring a lit candle with young children?
2. What are the risks?
3. What precautions can you take to ensure children's safety?

-Making candles and observing candles-Each participant will make a candle out of sheets of beeswax. They will light them outside and describe what they see.

**Rationale:** Fire is intriguing and magical to children. It is a part of nature that

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provides unique opportunities for challenge and discovery . It can be explored safely with proper precautions. By safely exploring fire with children, can provide children with a valuable learning experience. Most ECEs would never consider using fire as a subject for exploration, but it can be done with good planning.

**10 min:** Share with the participants some examples of activities other ECEs have done with fire, and what precautions they have taken. On a projector, share Claire Warden's Benefit/risk assessment for fire activities.

**Rationale:** This will help participants see how other early childhood educators approach the topic of fire as an exploration with young children, and the safety precautions that they have taken.

**10 min: No Trace Fire** (Warner, 2015)

Using a metal cake pan lined with aluminum foil, a fire starter, matches, and some kindling, start a fire in the cake pan. Have a bottle of water nearby. Give each participant a bamboo skewer and a marshmallow. Have them roast the marshmallows on the fire, then put it out.

**Rationale:** To show how easy and safe a fire activity can be. The 'no trace fire' is a fun way to end this workshop day.

Homework for next week:

1. Post a photo on Facebook of yourself working towards your goal(s).

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2. Try an 'air' or 'fire' activity. Write down what you did and how it went. Be ready to share for our last session.
3. Potluck sign-up sheet: our last session is coming up!
4. Shelter building: for our last session please bring an old blanket, sheet, or tarp. If you have some rope, bring that as well.

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**Session 6/6: Building Shelters with Children/Picnic Potluck/Wrap-up****Meet at local area for workshop setting**

**20 min:** Slideshow of Facebook photos during the last 5 sessions. Ask each participant to share how they were able to achieve their goals over the last 6 sessions. Will this change their practice with their students? What would you like to do next?

**Rationale:** Participants will reflect upon what they hoped to achieve during the 6 sessions. They will also listen to what the other participants gained during the 6 sessions.

**20 min.** Introduction to Shelter and Den Building with Children

Slideshow of different shelters and dens. Discuss David Sobels' (2002) book, *Children's Special Places: Exploring the role of forts, dens, and bush houses in middle childhood*.

**60 min:** Go outside. With materials provided build a shelter in teams of three. Ensure that you use the provided strapping to protect any trees you may use from rope abrasion. If it is raining, the goal will be to make a shelter that is waterproof. When shelters are completed, each group will present their shelter/den/hideaway. Remind participants to protect trees when using them to build shelters, by using already felled branches or hammock strapping when tying ropes to trees. Never tie ropes around the trunks of trees. Use adjustable strapping around tree branches to reduce rope abrasion and the choking of tree limbs.

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Examples of things that will be provided:

- Long slender logs or poles
- Sticks
- Tarps
- Rope and strapping to protect the trees from rope abrasion
- String
- Old curtains, sheets
- Tree branches, found, or used from felled trees – found, or used from felled trees, not cut from living trees
- Blankets and pillows (optional)

**Rationale:** A really fun way to end our workshop series. Hopefully participants will gain some ideas and skills for building shelters with the children they care for. Children all over the world have an innate desire to create their own shelters and cozy spaces into early adolescence. Sobel (2002) speculates that it is a child's way of exploring their sense of self. In later childhood, shelter building serves as a physical representation of the child's sense of self developing away from the safety of the parent.

**60 min:** Potluck and Socializing.

- Sharing of resources such as books, workshops', and websites for further professional development.
- Participants will be asked to fill out an evaluation form before they leave.

**Rationale:** Participant feedback will inform future workshops.



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**20 min:** Wrap-up/Goodbye.



## **Chapter Four Reflections**

I began my thesis after attending a workshop of which Claire Warden was the presenter. Warden spoke of the Forest Schools she founded in Scotland, and why they were beneficial for child development. As an early childhood educator [ECE] I had been trained to prepare the indoor environment for learning and exploration. It had not occurred to me that the outdoor natural environment could be the best learning environment for young children. By attending that workshop I was inspired to learn more about the Forest School movement, and how I could use Forest School principals in my own work with children. I also wanted to find a way that other ECEs could access nature in their programs. Professional development for ECEs often has an indoor focus. I realized that part of the problem was that many adults do not enjoy going outside. All the research I had previously done about the indoor environment and how it can be improved no longer seemed as important. I wanted to explore how I could become more outdoor focused in my programming for children, and how I could help other ECEs as well. I decided I wanted to focus my thesis on developing a workshop series that would build confidence in ECEs going outside in nature. Becoming a Forest School practitioner myself seemed to be beyond my reach, as I considered Forest Schools an extreme example of what could be done with children in nature. The more experiences I had with the Forest and Nature school movement, the more I wanted to learn and do more work with children in the forest. I gradually decided that I wanted to become a Forest School Practitioner.

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I have attended three other workshops that focused on uniting children with nature. Using the information I gained from reviewing the literature and attending workshops, I have been able to implement changes in the children's programming. I am happy to report that it has been a rewarding and exciting project that I will continue to do as long as I work with children. I am on a waiting list to take the Forest School practitioner course in the spring of 2016. I believe strongly that all children should be able to access nature, not just the lucky few that attend a Forest School. Children in urban areas need nature for their optimal development as well.

Bonnie Davison came to Nova Scotia in May 2015, and gave a workshop on taking literacy activities outdoors. She is the founder of the Victoria Nature School, in Victoria, British Columbia. She answered many questions about what it is like to start a nature preschool, and how she was able to manage safety issues and licencing standards. Davison emphasized the need for conducting 'risk assessments' before deciding to do any activity in a forest school setting that has a potential risk. By taking a detailed account of potential hazards that could occur during a forest school activity, and then adding precautions that would be taken during the activity to mitigate them, the overall risk to children is reduced. She also discussed several safety procedures that prevent children from getting lost. One is to show children the boundaries of the area they can explore, and have them practice over and over again so they know how far they can go into the woods. The other is to play the 'coyote howl game'. When the teacher howls loudly, the children are to howl in return and come running to the

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teacher who is howling. I have used the coyote howl game with the preschoolers and it has been very effective at getting them to return to me safely and quickly.

At this workshop I met Sally Trower, the founder of Wild Child Forest School. I am planning on spending a day at her school so I can see what it looks like for children to be in the forest all day long. I am hoping this will inform my practice with preschool children.

The early childhood program I worked for, had easy access to a nearby nature trail. It had many natural features and I felt it was a good place to bring the preschool class I taught and cared for. The children had been drawn to the various bodies of water on the trail. I thought my level of comfort with their explorations would be high, but I soon realized it was low. The children were drawn to fast moving and deep water. Davison suggested that a low teacher/child ratio be maintained at all times while in the forest, and I am glad that I followed this rule by having a 1 adult with five children ratio. The research states that children must be taken to the same space in nature many times to become connected to it, and to increase their competency in that space. We continued to visit this spot by a stream and a pond every week. My comfort level improved with the increased competence the children had in these areas. They were more careful, and less frantic. I conducted a risk assessment for the river with my co-worker, and we decided that the stream would be unsafe for the children to stand in. Instead, they had weekly water and mud play in a small pond just off the trail. We also raised tadpoles that we caught in a ditch beside the pond and they thrived in a fish tank

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in the centre's lobby. The children were able to observe their growth and development every day, even when not on the trail.

The second workshop I attended was at the Tir-na-nog forest school in Sussex, New Brunswick. On a sunny and warm Saturday in May, I spent the day with other child and nature enthusiasts. The workshop was offered by the owner and operator of the Tir-na-nog forest school. Members of Forest School Canada ran the workshop sessions, which focused on safety procedures, and art activities that can be done with children in the forest. This workshop had a huge impact on my understanding of how a nature school is conducted. I was able to explore the property and see how the 'classroom' was set up. I was amazed and delighted at the simplicity of the forest classroom. Each area under the trees had a few materials and tarps to define them. There was an art area, a housekeeping area, a writing area, and several areas for mud exploration and building. There were only a few human-made materials, such as string, paint, paper, and wooden furniture. There was a tiny stream with pieces of lumber and branches for building surrounding the muddy edges. A large branch lashed to two trees, with nails sticking out served as a hanging area for the children's backpacks. Some old lockers turned sideways stored the children's raingear. A contraption using a giant stockpot as a container for water, hooked up by a rubber hose to an old sink served as a handwashing station. There were hammocks everywhere in the woods, as well as a zip-line and a rope climbing wall between the trees. Picnic tables were where the children ate their snacks and lunches. There were also two fire pits and a shelter with three walls and a woodstove in the middle for children to warm themselves in the colder months. The

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most wonderful aspect was two baby lambs that wandered through the children's play space that were as tame as friendly dogs. These lambs were borrowed from a local farm to be raised by the children and teachers at the school during the spring and summer months. I decided I wanted to become a forest school practitioner after all. I am on the waiting list for the course in 2016.

The third workshop I attended was a pilot project sponsored by several organizations, including Hike Nova Scotia, and the Adventure Earth Centre; The workshop Titled: "Reconnecting with nature: Hands on activities and leadership skills workshop." We spent the day in the beautiful forested area surrounding Flemming Park in Halifax. The leaders of the workshop were employees of the Adventure Earth Centre, which offers programs to children and youth that involves them working and exploring in nature. They took us through an 'earth walk' during which we participated in various activities that tied into a central story line. The story line led us into the forest, examining flora and fauna with a magnifying glass, building shelters, exploring trees wearing blindfolds, sitting quietly under the trees reflecting on our experiences, creating art, and lastly, roasting marshmallows over a small fire that was made in a cake pan. At the end of the workshop we were each given a copy of *Earth Adventures in the Halifax Region: 24 Nature Trails for Fun and Discovery* by Warner, Barlow, & Taylor (2010). This workshop was aimed at reconnecting older children and youth to nature. However, I also found it enormously useful as an ECE. All of the activities seemed relevant for very young children. I also realized that my thesis would be valuable to this organization. While they have a number of programs connecting older children and youth to nature, I

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believe that if they knew the benefits extend to young children as well, and that I have developed training around this, they would offer programs for the early childhood population as well. The facilities and location are ideal for the workshop I have developed. I intend to contact them in the coming months to see if they would be interested.

Working on my thesis to develop a workshop for early childhood educators to use more nature in their curriculum has been very rewarding. The workshops I have attended were inspiring and informative. I have felt encouraged to spend more time outside myself and with my own children. There is enormous value in spending time in the forest. As a family we spend more time and less money while we are together in nature. I have gained knowledge and experiences that will positively impact myself, my children, and the children I care for. I hope to share this with other ECEs. I look forward to the next stage of my career, when I become a trained forest school practitioner.

### **Workshop Reflections**

Upon completing one of the final drafts of my workshop series titled: *Enjoying Nature with Young Children: A workshop for Early Childhood Educators*, I was excited to be asked to provide a professional development workshop for Mount Saint Vincent University, for the department of Child and Youth Study. I decided to do a workshop on a Saturday morning for three hours. I felt this was what I could handle for the first workshop I would be teaching on my thesis subject. This time frame proved to be very



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challenging for me, because I struggled with what to include from my six week series, in the three hours I had given myself.

I found it easy to name the workshop, as I used the words I had thought of while writing my thesis. “The forest is for everyone: Using forest school principles to inspire your program.” This was the whole point of my thesis. That no matter where your program is located, or what your background is, exploring nature alongside children will provide many benefits to children. The key is the attitude of the adult caregivers who are guiding the children.

Deciding what I would present in the workshop was a daunting task. I wanted to provide a meaningful experience for those attending. When told that my workshop was full, I was excited, but also felt an added pressure for it to be the best it could be. I re-read all of the literature I had discussed in my literature review, and then read more. I wanted to provide practical outdoor experiences, but felt that the participants needed information about why going out into natural spaces with children was so important. I decided that I would do a two-hour indoor session, with a one- hour outdoor session, where we would explore activities to do with young children outdoors.

On the day of my workshop I felt very well-prepared. I delivered the information about current research on children and nature using discussion, power point, personal anecdotes, and small group work. We then discussed forest school principals in Canada and Scotland, and how they are relevant to our work in urban child care centres. We explored the challenges ECEs encounter when trying to allow for play in nature, and

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some possible solutions. The time went by very quickly, and I felt like everyone was very interested in the subject and content of the workshop.

The 3 hours flew by, and I ran out of time for the outdoor session, where I had some outdoor art activities planned. This was the first time I had delivered my workshop content, and I never had the ability to see how long my presentation component was. I was so worried about not having enough material that I over-planned for the material I was going to present. The thought of doing a six-hour workshop seemed intimidating, but now I think it would have been better so that after the information component of the workshop was delivered, there would be plenty of time to explore outdoor spaces and activities with the participants. While the feedback I received was very positive, some of the participants said they missed not doing the outdoor segment of the workshop.

The workshop series that I developed is the framework I will use to teach further workshops. While I may not have the opportunity to teach a six-session workshop series, I probably will be teaching more workshops on my thesis subject. Depending on the experience and interests of the participants, the content of my workshop will change to suit the needs of the adult participants. Also, the location and context of the workshop will determine the activities and information that are delivered.

Overall, the experience of delivering my own workshop that I had developed myself was enormously positive. Before doing the workshop I was very nervous, but I

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was determined to go ahead no matter how I felt about it. I am really glad I did. I feel much more confident and would love to teach more in the future.

**Chapter 5**

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