

Coaching & Mentoring CONNECTIONS

ISSUE 2 • May 2025

Our goal is to provide you with practical, inspiring resources to support your work and professional growth in the early learning and child care field.

Welcome to the May edition of the ECCDC Coaching and Mentoring newsletter which will be focusing on **nature and outdoor play**. This may be very apt for some of you as we move into Spring but as the saying goes “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing.” (Unknown).





Spotlight on Outdoor Play

How we view outdoor play in early learning and child care has changed considerably over the past decade, which is reflected by Ontario's Ministry of Education (2014) highlighting that "Many early years programs are beginning to view their outdoor playgrounds as places for discovery and learning with bodies, minds, and senses rather than just places to blow off steam" (p.32) with educators discovering that everything that they do indoors they can do outdoors - and more! Many programs are spending much more time outdoors than the minimum requirement of two hours and are incorporating gardening and nature-based experiences within their programming with some primarily based outdoors, utilizing a Forest Schools approach.



To watch The benefits of Outdoor Learning for Early Childhood Education, click on the image at left or [here](#).



To watch Outdoor Learning with Young Children, click on the image at left or [here](#).

Are you curious about nature-based play experiences and how you can incorporate them within your program? If so, you are in luck as ECCDC intern Sara Abbara has researched nature-based experiences to share with you.

Nature-Based Experiences in Early Childhood Education by Sara Abbara, Brock University, Student Intern with the ECCDC

Definition

Nature-based experiences involve outdoor learning and interactions with natural environments, such as forests, gardens, parks, and water bodies. These experiences promote physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development while fostering a sense of environmental responsibility (Sobel, 1996).

Characteristics of Nature-based Experiences

- Encourages active exploration and curiosity in natural settings.
- Enhances physical health and gross motor skills.
- Supports problem-solving and critical thinking.
- Promotes emotional regulation and mindfulness.
- Strengthens connections with nature and environmental awareness.

Types of Nature-based Play in Early Learning

- **Outdoor Free Play** – unstructured play in natural spaces (e.g. climbing trees, running on grass).
- **Gardening and Planting** – hands-on experiences with soil, seeds, and plants.
- **Water Play** – exploring streams, puddles, and rainwater.
- **Sensory Nature Play** – engaging with textures like mud, leaves, and rocks.
- **Animal and Insect Exploration** – observing birds, bugs, and small animals.
- **Seasonal Play** – engaging in nature-based activities throughout the seasons (e.g. collecting autumn leaves, building snow structures).
- **Nature Walks and Hikes** – exploring trails and observing natural surroundings.

The Role of Educators in Nature-Based Learning

- Creating safe outdoor environments with diverse natural elements.
- Encouraging child-led exploration and observation of nature.
- Integrating environmental education into daily learning.
- Providing loose parts like sticks, rocks, and leaves for open-ended play.
- Supporting risky play to build confidence and resilience.
- Documenting children’s interactions and reflections on their outdoor experiences.

Research and Theoretical Foundations

Richard Louv’s Nature-Deficit Disorder

Lack of time spent in nature contributes to behavioral, emotional, and physical challenges in children (Louv, 2005).

- Outdoor learning helps mitigate stress, anxiety, and attention difficulties.

David Sobel’s Place-Based Education

Children develop a sense of place and belonging through experiences in their local environment (Sobel, 1996).

- Hands-on interactions with nature enhance learning and engagement.

Ontario’s Early Years Frameworks

- *How Does Learning Happen?* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) emphasizes the importance of outdoor play for well-being and engagement.
- *Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT)* (2007) supports nature-based experiences as a key component of physical and cognitive development.

Example of Nature-Based Play in Action

Activity: Nature Scavenger Hunt (Exploration & Observation)		
Learning Areas: Science, Gross Motor Skills, Sensory Awareness		
Step 1: Set Up the Environment	Step 2: Inquiry & Exploration	Step 3: Reflection & Extension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose an outdoor location such as a park, forest, or schoolyard. Create a scavenger hunt list with items like leaves, rocks, insects, and flowers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage children to find and collect items from the list. Use magnifying glasses or binoculars to observe details. Ask open-ended questions: <i>“What do you notice about this leaf?”</i> or <i>“How does this rock feel?”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss findings and observations as a group. Create nature-inspired art using collected items. Extend learning by planting seeds or building outdoor structures.

Bibliography and References

- Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Algonquin Books.
- Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond ecophobia: Reclaiming the heart in nature education*. The Orion Society.
- White, R. (2014). *Young children’s relationship with nature: Its importance to children’s development and the earth’s future*. Routledge.
- Waite, S. (2017). *Children learning outside the classroom: From birth to eleven*. SAGE Publications.

Government Documents

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). *Early learning for every child today (ELECT)*.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *How does learning happen? Ontario’s pedagogy for the early years*. Queen’s Printer Press



Are you curious about large loose parts play outdoors? If you answered YES, then click on the image at left or [here](#) to watch the video from Earth Play Canada, *Playing with Loose Parts*.

Gardening with Children

Spring has well and truly arrived, and you may be starting to plant your garden at home and looking forward to sharing the joy of gardening with the children you work with. Peter Gray is a psychology researcher, scholar, and long-time play advocate who highlights the benefits, both physical and psychological, of gardening. For more information on the benefits of gardening please [click here](#). For more information about gardening with children in early learning and child care, please [click here](#) to check out Community Playthings article, *Gardening with Children*.

Active Play and Physical Literacy

Children are active and on the go all the time ... right? In fact, children are not as active as we think, and research indicates that children are not engaging in the recommended daily levels of physical activity as outlined by the Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology (CSEP). However, children are generally more physically active when playing outdoors, and physical activity supports children's physical literacy. Physical literacy is something that is gaining traction within early learning and child care. You can find out more about physical literacy in early learning and child care by [clicking here](#) to access the Active For Life website resources.

To find out more about the CSEP guidelines for children 0-4 please [click here](#); for children 5-17, [click here](#).

Professional Development

You may be interested in the **Exploring the Possibilities of Makerspaces in Outdoor Environments** session, which takes place in person in Niagara on Tuesday June 3, 2025 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm EST. To find out more information and to register, please [click here](#).

Networking Opportunities

If you are an educator in Niagara and curious about incorporating cooking outdoors and nature recipes within your program, then join fellow nature enthusiasts at the Niagara Nature Alliance Network on Wednesday May 21, 2025. [Click here](#) to register.

ECCDC Blogs and Podcasts

If you would like to find out more about outdoor and nature play, check out these ECCDC blogs and podcasts.



[Click here](#) to read *Unleashing Nature's Playground: Embracing All-Weather Play in Early Learning Programs*

[Click here](#) to read *Don't Shy Away from Outdoor Play!*

[Click here](#) to read *Risky Play Outdoors*

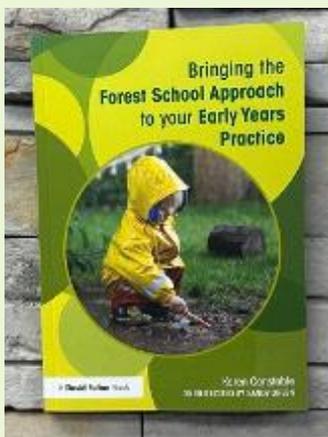
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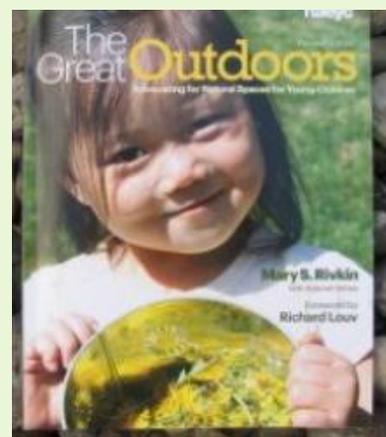
[Click here](#) to listen to *The Benefits of Extending Outdoor Play and How it Can Encourage Creative Thinking.*

Outdoor Nature-Based Books

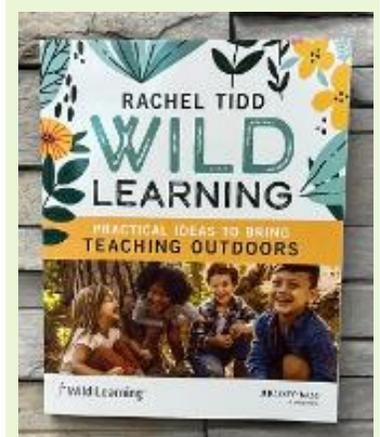
The following books are available to borrow from the ECCDC lending library and for purchase via the [ECCDC E-Store](#).



Bringing the Forest Schools Approach to Your Early Years Practice by Karen Constable



The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children by Mary S. Rivkin with Deborah Schein



Wild Learning: Practical Ideas to Bring Teaching Outdoors by Rachel Tidd

Resource Delivery Service

For those of you who have memberships with ECCDC, we offer a resource delivery service. For more information or to arrange a delivery directly to your program, please contact the ECCDC at 905.646.7311 ext. 304 or by [email](#).

Of Interest



'What's Your YES Guru' and a long-standing friend and supporter of the ECCDC, **Rusty Keeler**, has a new Play Nature Podcast. Rusty is a play advocate who is on a mission to connect children with nature through outdoor play and natural playscapes. [Click here](#) to check out his podcasts.

Rusty has partnered with the ECCDC to facilitate a number of sessions, which have included Loose Parts Play, Creating Outdoor Play Environments, and featured in the Rusty Keeler book study, *Adventures in Risky Play: What is Your Yes?*

Coming Soon

Calling All School Age Educators

If you are a school age educator and would like to enhance relationships and your connections with the families you work with and partner organizations, then this ECCDC webinar is for you. **Facilitating Relationships with Families & Connections Between Families and Partner Organizations** is taking place on Thursday May 15, 2025 from 7:00 to 9:00pm via Zoom. [Click here](#) to register.

June Podcast

June's ECCDC podcast conversations will focus on nature-based play in early learning and child care. Keep an eye on your inbox mid-June.

The ECCDC podcast is available on **Spotify** and **Apple** Podcasts! [Click here](#) to listen to any of the ECCDC Podcasts.

Educator Well Being through Mindfulness

This month we continue the nature theme by offering you an experience to support your well-being. We hope to inspire you to take a walk with nature. This activity involves stepping outside and immersing yourself in the natural environment, whether it's a park, a forest, a beach, or even your neighbourhood. Walking in nature is not just a physical exercise; it's a way to connect with the world around you and find tranquility.



Embracing the Great Outdoors

Nature offers a unique setting that can help reduce stress, improve mood, and increase feelings of well-being. The sights, sounds, and smells of the outdoors have a naturally calming effect, helping to clear your mind and bringing a sense of peace. Following are several strategies to get you started.

Getting Started with Nature Walks

Find Your Space

Look for green spaces in your area, like local parks, trails, or nature reserves.

Start by

Greeting the mother earth and giving thanks for everything she shares with us.

Go at Your Own Pace

Whether you prefer a leisurely stroll or a brisk walk, do what feels comfortable and enjoyable for you.

Be Present

Try to leave your phone and other distractions behind. Focus on the moment, observing the environment around you.

Engage Your Senses

Pay attention to the different sensory experiences – the sound of leaves rustling, the sight of wildlife, the feel of the breeze.

Make it a Routine

Regular nature walks can become a cherished part of your weekly routine, offering consistent benefits.

Benefits of Walking in Nature

Research has shown that spending time in nature can lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases, and even improve cognitive function. It's a simple, yet effective way to take care of both your physical and mental health.

Incorporating Mindfulness

To enhance the experience, try incorporating mindfulness into your walks. This can involve mindful breathing, walking meditation, or simply being aware of each step you take and the sensations you experience. Incorporating nature walks into your Mindful Monday is a beautiful way to connect with the environment, promote physical health, and find mental clarity. It's a practice that reminds us of the simple joys of life and the restorative power of nature.

What's Coming in the Next Edition of Coaching & Mentoring CONNECTIONS?

The next edition of the coaching and mentoring newsletter will hit your inbox mid-June and will highlight **environmental sustainability**.