



# preschool beyond walls

**Blending Early Childhood Education  
and Nature-Based Learning**

Rachel A. Larimore

# CONTENTS

vi Foreword by Claire Warden

vii Acknowledgments

1 Introduction

## 6 PART I: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

7 CHAPTER 1: What Is a Nature-Based Preschool?

15 CHAPTER 2: Establishing Your Program's Philosophy and Pedagogy

33 CHAPTER 3: Staffing Considerations

47 CHAPTER 4: Practical Concerns

## 56 PART II: PHYSICAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

57 CHAPTER 5: The Indoor Classroom

73 CHAPTER 6: The Outdoor Classroom: The Natural Play Area

91 CHAPTER 7: The Classroom Beyond

## 98 PART III: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

99 CHAPTER 8: Planning the Day

106 CHAPTER 9: Setting Families Up for Success

114 APPENDIX A: Resources for Nature-Based Activities

117 APPENDIX B: Resources for Developing Your Natural Play Area

119 APPENDIX C: Nature-Based Educational Supplies

121 References and Recommended Reading

126 Index





# Chapter 1: WHAT IS A NATURE-BASED PRESCHOOL?

**Nature-based preschools (NBPs) are part of a broader category known as nature-based early childhood education (NbECE),** which refers to any program that combines practices from early childhood education and environmental education. There are a variety of programs within NbECE, but this book focuses solely on NBPs, which fully integrate the best practices of each discipline into a unique pedagogy. The result is an approach much greater than the sum of its parts.

Given the benefits children reap from nature, in my ideal world every preschool would be a full-fledged NBP. While I may be more optimistic about changing the world than some, I am not completely naïve. I realize this is not a realistic goal. I do believe a realistic goal is moving all programs *toward* full integration.

Almost any program providing early childhood programming is somewhere on a continuum of integrating nature. You may, for example, bring interesting plants and animals into your classroom for the children to examine. You probably provide books about nature, including informational texts on everything from trees to grass to water to birds to unique ecosystems like tallgrass prairies or coral reefs. You may take the children on field trips to local parks or to a zoo. If so, that's great! This book is primarily focused on helping you move your program even further along the continuum toward becoming an NBP than you already are. However, before moving into suggestions for changing current practices, it's important to first understand early childhood education and environmental education as separate disciplines and then to see how those disciplines are integrated.

---

## Where Early Childhood Education and Environmental Education Meet

The first eight years of a child's life is a period of incredible cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and spiritual development. Teaching in early childhood is guided by developmentally appropriate practice, as outlined by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, which emphasizes learning through play. Many programs utilize an emergent-curriculum approach, in which teachers plan activities and projects based on the interests, needs, and skills of the specific group of children they are working with. Supporting the love of learning, curiosity, and sense of wonder early on is critical for children's happiness and lifelong success. There is mounting evidence that play-based, child-centered approaches to early childhood education support later

academic success. The good news is that the NBP approach is rooted in a play-based, emergent curriculum that emphasizes discovery and wonder!

Environmental education (EE), broadly speaking, is focused on developing individuals who are stewards of the planet. To accomplish this goal, EE includes knowledge, skills, and emotional connections to lead to pro-environmental behaviors. EE in the early years focuses primarily on discovery and wonder about the natural world; builds individuals' comfort outdoors; and lays the foundation for a lifelong connection with the natural world—helping children develop pro-environmental behaviors.

Where the disciplines of early childhood and environmental education meet is NbECE. This type of experience is much more than an early childhood program that happens to meet outside. Learning is not just occurring *in* nature, but nature is infused into all aspects of learning and central to the pedagogy. NbECE programs include full-time, outdoor programs such as forest kindergartens and waldkindergartens, as well as NBPs. This book is focused on developing NBPs. While there are many possibilities for the structure and operation of an NBP, my goal is to outline what I believe is the ideal NBP so that, wherever your starting point is, you can move toward that approach.

So what makes an NBP different from a traditional preschool? Historically, NBPs were primarily housed at nature centers, but the variety of business structures is constantly growing. There are farm-based programs, programs at universities, programs at zoos, public-private partnerships, and much more. In the end, what is most important is not the administrative or financial structure but the pedagogy within the program.

NBPs fully integrate the best practices of early childhood education with the best practices of EE. They are a type of licensed program for three- to five-year-olds, with at least 30 percent of each class day (whether it is part- or full-day) held outside. Nature is the driving theme and is infused into all parts of the experience. Claire Warden, author of *Learning with Nature*, refers to the spaces at an NBP as the indoors, the outdoors, and what she calls “the beyond”: the natural areas away from the school. NBPs emphasize building relationships with the natural world through extensive daily outdoor experiences and whole-child development through a child-centered, emergent curriculum that focuses on nature.

---

## Pedagogy of Nature-Based Preschools: An Overview

Being operated by a nature center does not make a preschool nature based. Having a preschool near a natural area does not necessarily make it nature based either. Having an outdoor play area with some natural materials also does not make a program nature based. So what does? The key to a nature-based approach is the day-to-day program practices—both structure and process—which come together to create the nature-based pedagogy. This means any program, if intentional about teaching and administrative practices, can be nature based. In other words, *your* program can be nature based as well!

## Goals

NBPs have two primary goals: educating children in developmentally appropriate ways and teaching environmental stewardship. This means we want to support young children's development in all domains: physical, social-emotional, and cognitive. This includes the subdomains within these areas, such as spiritual and aesthetic development. At the same time, NBPs strive to develop children's meaningful connection with the natural world, laying the foundation for the development of environmentally sustainable behaviors. For a nature-based approach, the connection to the natural world is not just one of many child development goals, but one of the most significant. After all, it's this blending of the two disciplines—early childhood and environmental education—that creates NbECE.

## Learning Spaces

Regular access to the physical environment is the first critical component to the NBP approach, and the structure of that physical space is the second. In an NBP, learning occurs indoors, outdoors in a natural play area, and in wilder spaces beyond the play area—inside, outside, and beyond. To illustrate, imagine for a moment this preschool.

As they arrive at school, the parents and children each sign in for the day in ways appropriate for their ages, deposit backpacks in the children's cubbies indoors, and then head outside to join the teachers. They slowly meander along a curvy, wooded path, fallen leaves crunching underfoot, as they make their way to the outdoor play area. There they are greeted by smiling teachers dressed in hats, mittens, and core layers. Children spot their friends at favorite spots like the sandbox, mud kitchen, digging hill, or other natural elements. With a quick "Bye!" to her parents, the newest arrival runs off to join her friends, rain suit swishing as she moves. Loose parts, such as sticks, buckets, and PVC pipes, become ramps, forts, traps to capture bad guys, and more. Teachers join in the fun, either playing alongside the children or joining as partners in play.

After about an hour, a teacher moves around the play area informing the children that play will wrap up in five more minutes. Children scurry to fill as much fun as they can into those minutes before the teacher shakes the squirrel call, signaling everyone to meet at the stump circle. Each person claims a stump as part of the group circle.

One teacher officially welcomes each student, acknowledging guests who have joined the class for the day and wishing well those students who are absent. After the welcome, the teacher leans into the circle and excitedly whispers, "Guess where we're going on our hike today?" Children's voices, full of hopeful conviction, shout out their favorite places—the meadow! the sand hill! the pond! "Those are all wonderful places that we'll visit again soon, but today we're going to the forest."



After discussing tools to take along for forest exploration, safety gear to carry on the trail, and counting the number of people, the group heads off. One teacher leads the pack, which loosely resembles a line. Another brings up the rear, and the third teacher and other adults help in the middle—all conversing with the children as they happily walk, skip, or jump along the trail. At the destination, safety is once again discussed, boundaries are designated, and tools are made

accessible. Exploration of the forest begins. Mirrors, spoons, bug boxes, and other tools are in full use as the children peek under mushrooms, lift logs, and touch tree bark.

Once the children have had sufficient time to explore, the teachers once again use the squirrel call to gather the group, reflect on their findings, and slowly make their way back to the preschool building. As the group enters the building, the feel of the outdoors follows them.

The rooms have a natural appearance with wood furniture, soft neutral colors on the walls, and the morning sun pouring through the large windows. Some children pull off their rain suits in one quick motion, showing this is not their first transition from outdoors to indoors. Other children slowly remove one item at a time, telling stories of their adventures to their neighbors. As they finish changing, the children zip into the classroom to find a spot at a table to begin a family-style snack, where they'll share even more tales of their morning adventure. With full tummies, they will finish their day with choice time and a small group activity inside the classroom.

The low window sill invites children to observe squirrels feasting at the bird feeders or to gaze out at the trees beyond. The materials throughout the classroom include a variety of nature-related items such as seed and rock collections, child-sized dress-up butterfly wings, birding vests, and binoculars. The puzzles have images of local wildlife and plants. The library includes storybooks about discovering nature and field guides to learn more about the local birds, wildflowers, and animal tracks. Pinecones, pine needles, acorns, dried corn, and a basket of leaves are situated among the paints, cotton balls, and yarn in the art area.

After playing in the classroom, the group gathers for one final story followed by the goodbye song. Teachers dismiss the children to find their parents and make their way along the same wooded path that had greeted them three hours before.

In this scenario, play occurs in three distinct spaces that reflect the local natural world. Each of these three spaces—inside, outside, and beyond—plays an important role. Ideally, the line between the outdoors and indoors is blurred. Through materials and teacher-child interactions, learning is connected to the experiences children have in the outdoors and beyond. The natural play area outdoors provides a variety of human-made and natural loose parts to create a rich learning space in support of all developmental domains. The beyond space then provides a wilder experience that is less predictable than the indoor and outdoor spaces—what will nature present to us today? The three distinct spaces (inside, outside, and beyond) vary in their amounts of human structure and dominance, with the inside being the most human-structured and the beyond the least.

According to Patti Bailie in the book *Nature Play and Learning Places*, children in NBPs are outside every day for *at least* 30 percent of the class session. A three-hour session would be outside for at least one hour; a six-hour program would be outside at least two hours. Many nature-based programs are outside much longer; in fact, many stay outside the entire day for several days out of the school year. The only exception to extensive, daily outdoor time is if the weather is dangerous. *Dangerous* means lightning, severe cold, extremely high winds, and so on. *Dangerous* does not mean rainy days



or days when the temperatures drop below zero. After all, appropriate clothing can make rainy weather and cold temperatures quite pleasant for play.

Of course, this daily outdoor time is not simply to see how tough children are and whether they can tolerate being outdoors in all conditions. Rather, the purpose of daily outdoor time is to provide positive and meaningful play opportunities for children. There is joy in jumping in a mud puddle. There is wonder in catching falling snowflakes on a mitten and deciding whether each snowflake really is unique. Daily outdoor time is an opportunity to see the wonder of the world in all its various states and to marvel at the different details that emerge in the sun, rain, snow, heat, and cold.

## Emergent Curriculum

In addition to the three dimensions of the physical environment, a core component of NBP pedagogy is an emergent curriculum. An emergent curriculum is founded on daily, responsive planning and teacher-child interactions that extend and build on children's interests. With so much outdoor time, the curriculum becomes rooted in what is happening seasonally as the natural world sparks children's interests.

The seasonal, authentic experiences, along with the children's interests, lead to studies that move inside, outside, beyond, and back again. One group of children, for example, might have discovered hundreds of worms crawling in and out of the spring soil. That is a seasonal happening that has piqued the children's interest. In the outdoor play area, teachers could provide additional buckets and spoons for collecting the worms. On an excursion beyond the play area, teachers might take along a dry-erase board for counting worms they find on the hike. Inside, a small group activity could be to create a worm racetrack, leading to conversations, predictions, and observations about which worm will make it to the finish line first and why. Of course, part of learning about worms is learning to treat them gently and return them to their habitat when the exploration is finished. The teachers allow the children's interests to guide the activities, and the teachers extend that learning to integrate multiple objectives.

Part of what defines an NBP is the intentional blending of experiences in nature with teaching practices. I'm sure as an early childhood educator you've heard people ask something along the lines of, "Oh, so all the children do all day is just play?" For most early childhood educators, this is about as nerve-racking as fingernails on a chalkboard, because we know that play is learning. I have a similar reaction to comments such as, "Oh, so you *just* go for a walk in the woods." Ack! Technically, yes, they're playing or walking in the woods, but high-quality educators help scaffold children's learning through observations, questions, and reflections. A walk in the woods may not have a predetermined destination, but the objective is always predetermined—children's learning.

## Teachers

An amazing physical environment and wonderful lesson plans are only part of supporting children's learning. The elements that will make or break a program in terms of quality learning are the interactions that happen among teachers and children. The role of NBP teachers is to connect the children's experiences throughout



# There's no such thing as **bad weather!**

Children are spending less time being outside in nature, playing, imagining, and learning about their surroundings. Instead, they're spending more time with tablets, televisions, and overly structured routines.

*Preschool Beyond Walls* shows practical and strategic ways educators can create rich, explorative, and interdisciplinary learning through extensive outdoor experiences.

Learn how to develop and implement a nature-based curriculum to support children's optimal learning, from start to finish. Whether you're creating a new curriculum or transitioning from a traditional approach, you will learn how to:

- Create a program philosophy
- Infuse nature into all aspects of your program
- Prepare teachers for a nature-centered approach
- Implement curriculum and pedagogy that emphasize inquiry-based learning through play and hands-on discovery
- Maintain high-quality early childhood practices that support children's development

*Preschool Beyond Walls* will help you turn your traditional classrooms into adventurous and stimulating learning environments no child can ignore!



**Rachel Larimore** worked for 15 years as director of education at the Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan. Not only does she write and speak extensively on connecting children to nature through high-quality, nature-based early childhood education, Larimore is also pursuing a PhD in curriculum, instruction, and teacher education at Michigan State University.

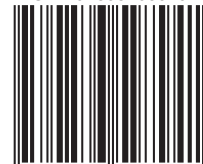


  
**Gryphon House**  
www.gryphonhouse.com

**GH 15940**

**U.S. \$34.95**

ISBN 9780876597941



9 780876 597941

53495 >

