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## Physical Activity in Nature: Lessons Learned from a Preschool Program

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According to Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, humans are genetically wired to gravitate towards nature. He describes his *biophilia hypothesis* as “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life” and suggests that — for reasons we can’t easily rationalize — we feel better, perhaps more complete, when we are in regular and repeated contact with green space (Wilson, 1984).



Photo: ECO Program & Ameris Photography

In my view, this innate and intuitive relationship is also advantageous for our physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wellness. One way to learn more about the health benefits and the ways we humans connect with nature is to study how children interact with their natural world.

Since September 2013, the Educating Children Outside (ECO) preschool program on Vancouver Island has been offering nature-based education for families with three- and four-year-olds.

Through my work with this program — which follows an exclusively outdoor experiential and immersive model — I have observed first-hand how preschoolers develop a rich sense of place as they play for three hours each morning in forests and along lakeside trails.

My view is that these children are “walking (and running/climbing/sliding/jumping) proof” of how regular playtime in green spaces is beneficial for the body, mind and soul. These are self-regulated, resilient, physically fit and capable preschool-aged children, who are also learning to navigate risks and make decisions which impact both themselves and their group.

As adults (i.e., big kids at heart), we have much to learn from these “mini-nature pioneers” and stalwart champions of the mud puddle!



## ECO Program

*Pedagogical principles are grounded in child-led, emergent, place-based and play-based philosophy.*

*Each morning, about half the time is spent on free play.*

## ECO Program in a Nutshell

Here are some of the approaches we use in the program:

### Operations

- ECO operates at a 1:8 ratio (instructor to child) at all times.
- ECO is led by a licensed and certified early childhood educator.
- Students are divided into groups; 3-year-olds participate two mornings per week and 4-year-olds participate three mornings per week.

### Program Model

- ECO is based on a community partnership model. We collaborate with post-secondary, not-for-profit and private sectors. We also have a large parent participation element.
- Our partner agency provides indoor space, use of the park, and naturalist educational services; all of which augments teaching and learning possibilities.
- Pedagogical principles are grounded in a child-led, emergent, place-based and play-based philosophy.

### Each Day of Learning is Different

- Rather than set out with a pre-determined teaching and learning agenda in mind, our educators are trained to be attuned to the students, including the emotional state of the group and individual comments or interests. We also adapt to environmental variables, such as weather, encounters with flora and fauna, and our surroundings.
- Each morning, about half of the time is spent on free play, with the other half used for structured circle time/activity time, snack time, and travel to and from our destination.
- The primary roles of the educators are to stimulate imagination, enhance curiosity, support appropriate risk taking and guide social development.
- The emphasis is on offering children a chance to develop their own learning tools, rather than using toys or objects with an intended and defined use.

## Lessons Learned

Here are five of the many lessons I've learned from observation:

### 1. Smile in the rain

As the saying goes, there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing choices. Our ECO kids wear weather-appropriate uniforms every morning; this means they are well-equipped and prepared each day to face any challenges that Mother Nature may send their way.



Photo: ECO Program & Ameris Photography

## 2. Look after each other

These children genuinely care for each other. Together their communal strength gives the whole group its “special powers.” The growth in empathy has been a truly wonderful outcome. As one child matter-of-factly put it: “We don’t move until everyone has their backpack done up, and if they can’t, Charlie can help.”

Working together as a team affords them opportunity to explore their surroundings with common purpose and amazing effectiveness.

## 3. Remember to play

As big kids (adults), many of us “forget” our ability to move freely and play. For instance, we face daily or societal norms such as lots of sedentary commuting time, screen time and work-related stress; we simply play or move much less than we did as kids.

The young explorers in the ECO program offer a rich and real example of the power of play, and remind us, as adults (and practitioners), that playing outdoors is good for us. In fact, play has a unique ability to make us feel younger, plus it’s free, it feels good, and it brings people together.

It’s not just the ECO program that reminds us of these factors. For instance, the Forest School Canada guide for educators — *A Head, Heart and Hands Approach to Learning Outdoors* — lists no less than 14 different variations of play as demonstrated by children immersed in a green classroom.

## 4. Don't be afraid of the unknown

Each day, as I watch the group of preschoolers being dropped off in a forested classroom — with no walls and no hallmarks of a traditional preschool environment — I am amazed at their courage and strength.

Day in and day out, the kids are faced with a barrage of variables in the natural landscape and environment, including uncertainties or disruptions that would throw many adults into a fit of despair.

## 5. Use your imagination

In such a rich, playful and active outdoor world, the ECO kids also remind us to be curious and imaginative. For instance, in their minds, a simple stick can take on a thousand meanings (e.g., wand, sword, tool, etc.) and be used in all kinds of active, fun ways.



Photo: ECO Program & Ameris Photography

## Remember to Play!

*The young explorers in the ECO Program offer a rich and real example of the power of play.*

*This reminds us, as adults and practitioners, that playing and being active outdoors is good for us.*

## Forest Time and “Park Prescriptions”

Beyond my personal experiences with the ECO program and children, there are other sources that support the importance of “green medicine” or forest/park time for people of all ages.

Recent studies have demonstrated that time spent in nature can result in a myriad of physiological benefits, one of the more potent examples being a buffering of the much maligned impacts of the body’s own stress response (Miyazaki, Park & Lee, 2011).

Another proponent of green medicine is Dr. Daphne Miller, who decided that in order to help her patients battle the many “diseases of indoor living,” she needed to start handing out “park prescriptions” mandating time spent in close contact with the healing powers of being active in nature (Miller, 2013).

## Tips and Recommendations

While the ECO program is unique in its scope and design, there are many transferrable, practical recommendations that health practitioners may find helpful:

1. **Don’t let “bad weather” be an excuse.** Whether it’s the wet, west coast of BC or a chilly winter in Alberta, the first step in successfully spending time outdoors is to be prepared and properly clothed, for the comfort of students and educators.
2. **Nature loves company.** One thing we constantly rediscover is the contagious nature of being in nature! There is a special energy that develops when people are active with others; kids, teams, families, and communities all benefit from support and encouragement that happens when spending time together outside.
3. **Advocate for green time.** Whenever possible in your work or practice, find a way to prescribe and advise your clients to get their daily dose of “vitamin green.” Often, it’s too easy to stay inside; sometimes all it takes is a reminder from a practitioner.
4. **Embrace inconvenience.** Join the fight against easy, sedentary, indoor lifestyles by pushing for less screen time and more outside time, such as walk pooling and bike riding.
5. **Be the change.** By modeling active choices to your clients, you are helping gain trust and spreading the virtues of a healthy, active, outdoor lifestyle. They’ll believe what they see.

## Conclusion

Through my involvement with the ECO program, I am continually amazed at how the children learn to navigate each day’s challenges with unheralded, natural, care-free expertise. Just watching them grow and learn physically and mentally is an inspiration, and it is a positive reminder for all adults to not be afraid to move, play and get outside every day! 

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Alberta Centre for Active Living or the WellSpring Advisory Committee.

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