Nature Preschools in the United States
2022 National Survey
Photo: South Mountain Nature School
Early Childhood Environmental Education: Time in Nature and More

Researchers from Stanford University examined the research literature and found that a variety of approaches in early childhood environmental education can lead to positive outcomes for children.

Learn more about this research at https://naaee.org/programs/eeworks/benefits-early-childhood
Nature Supports Early Childhood Education

Nature Is a Positive Setting for Learning
- Calmer and quieter settings
- Warmer relationships, cooperation
- Loose parts and autonomy promote creative, self-directed play

Nature Acts Positively on Learners
- More attentive
- Less stressed
- More self-disciplined
- More engaged and interested

Nature Promotes Children's Health
- More physical activity
- Better mental health

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Amber L. Fyfe-Johnson, ND, PhD; Marnie F. Hazlehurst, MS, PhD; Sara P. Perrins, EdM, PhD; Gregory N. Bratman, PhD; Rick Thomas, MESM, MS; Kimberly A. Garrett, MPH; Kiara R. Hafferty, BS; Tess M. Cullaz, BS, BS; Edgar K. Marcuse, MD, MPH; Pooja S. Tandon, MD, MPH. Nature and Children's Health: A Systematic Review. Pediatrics (2021) 148 (4): e2020049155.

natural start alliance
Counting Nature Preschools

- Nature preschools are not necessarily members
- Staff make a quick determination based on public information
  - Is it a "school" and is it "nature-based"?
- Including is not an endorsement
- Not including does not reflect program quality

Photo: Secret Forest Playschool
What is a Nature Preschool?
Key Characteristics of Nature Preschools

- Goals for child development and environmental literacy
- Nature central in curriculum, "nature-based" program
- Child-led, play-based approach
- Significant time outside
- Appropriate risk taking
Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook

- Describes practices in
  - Teaching
  - Environments
  - Safety
  - Administration
- Download the introduction at naturalstart.org
Early Programs at Nature Centers

New Canaan Nature Center
Connecticut

Dodge Nature Center
Minnesota

Schlitz Audubon Nature Center
Wisconsin

Chippewa Nature Center
Wisconsin
Wide Variety in Program Types

Farm-Based
Dumlin Farm Community Preschool - MA

Home-Based
Little Schoolhouse in the Woods - Oh

Zoo School
St. Louis Zoo Nature Preschool - MO

Lab School
University of Delaware Lab School

Public School
Y-Koda Nature School - WI

Head Start
Mid-Columbia Children's Council - OR

Language Immersion
Aventuras Forest School - CA

Inclusion
Imua Inclusion Preschool - HI
Past Reports

Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens
2017 NATIONAL SURVEY

Nature-based preschools and kindergarten continue to rise in popularity in the United States. A national survey of nature-based early childhood educators conducted in 2017 identified more than 250 nature preschools and forest kindergartens operating across the country. The programs serve approximately 10,000 children every year, and eight out of ten programs report that they started a waiting list in the previous twelve months. However, the survey also suggests that the nature-based programs do not reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of our nation.

The survey was jointly conducted by the Natural Start Alliance, the Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools, the Northern Illinois Nature Preschools Association, and the Washington Area Nature Preschools Association.


Nature-Based Preschools in the US
2020 SNAPSHOT
2022 National Survey

- Program Count
- Program Operations
- Children's Characteristics
- Staff Characteristics

Photo: South Mountain Nature School
How Many Nature Preschools?
Estimated Number of Nature Preschools in the United States, 1965-2022
Highest Number of Nature Preschools by State

California  Washington  Minnesota

Highest Number of Nature Schools Per Capita

Vermont  Maine  New Hampshire
Program Characteristics
Time Outside

- Most of the school day is spent outdoors: 70% of programs spend 70% or more of their school day outside
- Time outside increased from 75% of school day in 2017 to 80% in 2022
- Nearly a third (30%) of programs spend the entire school day outside
- Full-day programs spend 5 hours per day outside and half-day programs spend 3 hours outside on average
Covid Impacts

- Half of programs say pandemic increased time outdoors
- 80% say it increased demand (survey did not include closed programs)
- Brought mental health challenges for children and staffing challenges for programs
"The children are so strong from playing outside – it’s incredible! Their laughter, curiosity, and excitement has blessed us every day. As teachers, we have grown stronger too. We are learning a different way of teaching."

-Rose Volponi, Executive Director
Public Lands

- More than half of nature preschools (55%) operate on or visit public lands
- Public lands may include municipal parks, county parks, national forests, or national parks

Photo: Secret Forest Playschool
How Programs Use Public Lands

Appalachain Forest School

Northeast LA Forest School
Licensing

- Licensing can be challenging for outdoor programs
- Without licensing, no public funding for programs
- 58% of nature preschools are licensed
- Just 15% of all-outdoor programs are licensed
- Licensing rates haven't changed since 2017

Photo: Durham Community Preschool
States with Outdoor Preschool Licensing or Pending Legislation

- **Licenses outdoor preschools**: WA, OR, CO
- **Legislation pending**: OR
- **Licensing option in development**: CO
- **Legislation just passed**: CO
Outdoor Nature-Based Child Care Licensing
Total Number of Children Served

10,000 Children Annually
2017

25,000 Children Annually
2022
Average Percent of Multiple-Language Learners in Nature Preschools (2017 and 2022) and the Overall U.S. Population

- 2017: 6.6%
- 2022: 13.7%
- National Average: 23%
Dual Language, Language Immersion

Chavitos Nature School
Washington

Amigos del Bosque
Minnesota

Aventuras Forest School
California

My World Mandarin Nature School
Washington

Rainbow Mandarin Nature School
Washington
Children with Disabilities and Special Needs

- Nature preschools serve children with disabilities at similar rates as public schools
- Average percent of children with disabilities in programs is up from 2017:
  - 4.7% in 2017
  - 8.3% in 2022

Photo: Squaxin Island Child Development Center
Secret Forest Playschool
Duluth, Minnesota
Percentage of Children by Race and Hispanic Origin in Nature Preschools (2017 and 2022) and in the Overall U.S. Population

Race and Ethnicity:
- Multiracial
- White
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian American
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- African American/Black

Percentage of Population:
- Overall U.S. Population
- 2022 Nature Preschools
- 2017 Nature Preschools

Graph showing the percentage of children in various racial and ethnic categories in nature preschools compared to the overall U.S. population.
What is Driving Differences in Participation?

- Cost?
- Program Location?
- Program Length?
- Educational Preferences?
- Safety Concerns?
- Staff and Child Representation?
- What Other Factors to Consider?
Staff Characteristics

Photo: Appalachian Forest School
Total Staff

- Total Workforce:
  - 2022: 6,000 professionals
  - 2017: 1,500 professionals
- Average staff per program largely the same
- Growth in workforce due to growth in programs

Photo: Appalachian Forest School
Backyard Basecamp
Baltimore, Maryland

facebook.com/BackyardBasecamp
instagram.com/backyard_basecamp
Gender in the Workforce

Nature Preschools
- Female
- Male, Nonbinary, Other

Overall Preschool and Kindergarten
- Female
- Male, Nonbinary, Other
Median Wages for Preschool Teachers, Kindergarten Teachers, and the Average U.S. Worker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Workers</th>
<th>Median Hourly Wage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Workers</td>
<td>$0-$35.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preschool Teachers</td>
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Propelling Future Growth
Professional Training

- Unique practices and considerations, particularly around safety
- There are now degree programs, certificates, and certification programs, but more is needed to support growth
- Professional development programs can specifically address racial and ethnic disparities in the workforce
Professional Networks

- Growing national network of state and regional nature-based early education groups
- Groups focus on professional training, professional connection, and advocacy
- Most are volunteer-run with limited capacity
Policy Change for Outdoor Learning

- Licensing for outdoor preschools can add capacity to the early care and education system
- Public funding can help make outdoor learning more accessible for families
- Licensing regulations can elevate the importance of outdoor environments

Photo: University of Delaware Lab School
Nature for Every Child

- Diffusion of nature across the early childhood landscape is the goal
- Every school need not be a nature preschool
- Every child deserves a high-quality education and opportunities to play and learn in nature

Photo: Appalachian Forest School
Thank You!

natural start
alliance

naee
North American Association for Environmental Education

Photo: Appalachian Forest School