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Libraries Tackle “Nature Deficit”

Nature-based programs and storytimes for children, in and out of doors

BY REBECCA ZARAZAN DUNN

In the 1950s, many European countries started adopting nature-based early childhood programs outdoors. Snow, wind, rain, or shine, young children were, and still are, outside engaging in free play. With no rigid academic standards, are these students behind when they start school? Far from it.

Today, a renewed “back-to-nature” movement is afoot at schools and libraries. “Recent trends in early education have moved toward a focus on acquiring and drilling direct academic skills and facts, and away from play,” says Lia Grippo, founder of Wild Roots Forest School in Santa Barbara, CA, one of several nature-based schools for preschool and kindergarten-age children. “[Parents] are looking to give children a more natural childhood.”

Grippo points to Richard Louv’s book *The Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin, 2008) as a catalyst. The book “touched on existing feelings in our culture about children and nature,” and “normalizing the idea that healthy children require nature and nature needs children,” she says. It also introduced the term “Nature-Deficit Disorder” (<http://ow.ly/XeaMH>), a constellation of problems that occur when people are estranged from the outdoors, and highlights the positive effects nature has on learning and well-being.

Public libraries and nature-based learning

For public libraries, connecting their communities with nature is a perfect fit. You don’t have to go outside to do so. When I worked at the Chattanooga Public Library (CPL), I set up the Nature Center (<http://ow.ly/XjL25>), a touch table with objects such as leaves, lichen-covered tree branches, seedpods, and feathers. It was a valuable, fun hands-on experience for my urban patrons.

For the past two summers, Cate Levinson, youth services librarian of Niles (IL) Public Library, and her colleagues have hosted monarch caterpillars in their “Monarch House” for patron observation. The structure is a simple, wood-framed cube with a mesh top and fiberglass windows on all sides, and can house two to five caterpillars undergoing metamorphosis into butterflies. It has been a great learning experience for patrons and librarians, Levinson says. “We were able to answer patrons’ questions, point out



Above: Farm Stand Storytime, a partnership between the Chattanooga Public Library (CPL) and a local farm. Right: a touch table at CPL’s Nature Center.



subtle phenomena, and predict behavior without having to look it up.” Levinson’s other program, Armchair Astronomy (<http://ow.ly/Xe7TP>) for all ages, has patrons sit in a darkened room where they revel in a slideshow of galaxies, nebulae, and astrophotography and listen to Levinson narrate.

Partnerships

Forging partnerships can greatly broaden the scope of nature programming. The Arrowhead Library System in Mountain Iron, MN, started a wide-scale enterprise, The Great Outdoors @ your library (<http://ow.ly/Xe87t>). Partners range from the local parks department to the University of Wisconsin–Rock County to a nearby nature center. The library holds regular family programming at its branches and at the partner locations; its site recommends local outdoor areas to explore such as trails, lakes, and gardens. I found that teaming up with a local farm made for an ideal match. At CPL, I was searching for an outdoor storytime setting; Farm Stand Storytime (<http://ow.ly/XeFDZ>) was my answer. Children could enjoy sights, smells, and sounds that they couldn’t experience otherwise.

In collaboration with the Children & Nature Network, the Sun Ray Public Library (<http://ow.ly/XeatA>) in St. Paul, MN, undertook a renovation resulting in a “Nature Smart Library,” says branch manager Rebecca Ryan: the facility is designed and themed around a neighboring park. An alcove in the children’s room overlooks a reading garden, other library gardens, and the adjoining park, where programming also happens. The library circulates popular adventure backpacks equipped with 15–20 magnifying glasses, a first aid kit, bug boxes, and field guides to the flora and fauna of Minnesota.

The Nature Explorium at Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, NY, is an outdoor space for free play, with a water table, stage, garden, and climbing station. Tracy LaStella, coordinator for youth services, says that the space “offers a unique way to connect literacy, learning, and an appreciation for nature.” The library also provides a list of nature-based programs. A smaller initiative is the Wallingford (CT) Public Library’s Nature Corner (<http://ow.ly/XeaaH>), a space with nature books and field guides.

Nature storytime

Don’t have a nature-inspired area in your library or a park nearby? Storytime is an excellent platform to introduce children to the natural world. “Wonder and connection should

always precede facts in the arena of nature education with children,” says Grippo. A story “will have much value....In working towards ecological literacy with children, stories should always trump facts.”

“Books inspire young and old alike to peer closely, to observe a tree in all seasons, to look at a drop of water, to follow a snail or a bird for a day,” says Laurel Fynes, a kindergarten teacher in Mississauga, Ontario. The next step, Fynes says, is to curate areas to explore artifacts, based on those books: a bowl of water and droppers, a collection of shells or stones, pressed leaves, a terrarium with magnifiers and/or mirrors, a platter of seeds with a mortar and pestle for grinding. “Give them poetic language to name those observations,” she says. Sharing personal stories will also spark a child’s imagination. Take a moment to talk about the weather, a bird you saw on the way to the grocery store, or a leaf near your home.

We can learn a lot from forest schools and nature-minded librarians. Early-literacy models like Every Child Ready to Read are successful guides for library systems. Could we create a similar, easy-to-use model for ecological literacy?

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