

The Value of Being in the Natural World for Children

One afternoon last week, screams and yells erupted in the K-1 classroom. When I popped in, the children shouted, "the butterfly is coming out, right now!" The children sat and watched the emerging butterfly for over 20 minutes. This is not idle time; this is the beginning of scientific observation. They will never forget what they saw- more concrete than any book can deliver.

This reminds me that the best teacher is direct experience. This classroom teacher saw the value of having caterpillars in the classroom, and also made the space for the children to observe the caterpillars. The teacher went further and encouraged the children to each make a book about caterpillars and butterflies, putting in their own drawings of what they observed. The children jumped to it, and were deeply engaged in their book creation.

At the Village School, we want to facilitate as much direct experience as possible. Direct experience reaches all the senses; visual, audio, touch, smell and taste, and leaves a concrete memory in its wake. For children, direct experience happens most in nature. ***Here at the Village School, we believe that contact with nature is an essential part of the learning experience.*** Being in nature is a formative direct experience for children, one with profound effects throughout a lifetime.

We call it the 'natural world,' and those words have meaning. It is the *natural* world for children, where they are themselves naturally, where they feel most at home. They can literally connect with the earth under their feet- it's grounding for children. Can you remember your own love of playing outside, how the wind and trees and bushes were magical?

A child's natural habitat is the natural world, not a room full of plastic toys. Children instinctively love to climb trees, make leaf piles, play in the mud, turn over rocks looking for bugs, dig holes to find treasure and more. They can pile up a bunch of branches, and voila, a castle is born. In the natural world, children explore and discover. They are budding scientists, able to spend a long time studying ants or caterpillars, or rocks, or whatever captures their attention.

In nature, children are not constricted. Their bodies are free to move, their minds are focused in the moment, their emotions are free also. In nature, children can develop a strong sense of themselves. With the natural world as their environment, they learn to create, collaborate and negotiate.

We want children to become avid learners, and nature sparks their curiosity, their interest, their attention, their persistence in investigating and wanting to learn more. In nature, children are learning all the time. They are learning about the wind, about rain, about soil, about their own strength and physical abilities. They are also learning teamwork, working with a group of friends to make a debris hut or inventing a social system for their make-believe village in a cluster of small pines.

Outside, children develop imaginative play with others, the basis of future creativity. Play is so essential for children- it develops imagination, it develops social skills, and children learn

autonomy. Children develop and test friendships, through the medium of play in nature. How do we get to know someone? Is it only by talking? Or by 'doing' together too? In outdoor play, relationships are being built between children, unfolding without time pressure, and unforced.

Being outside gives the children plenty of space. They can move as much as they want, including running. How many times, have we said, for safety's sake, "No running inside." Outside, children can work on their small motor skills (drawing, writing) and their large motor skills (monkey bars, swings, digging and lifting heavy objects).

Direct learning takes place when a group of children is outside, making countless discoveries. As a bonus, they become fearless about dirt and bugs and rain. When children are used to being outside frequently, an outside math class is not a distraction, nor is an outdoor poetry class or an outdoor recorder class. It's actually more inspiring, more settled and more natural.

This year, because we see the tremendous value of outdoor time in nature, we decided that our morning preschool children would spend two whole mornings outside. We put up a canopy for snack and art projects or getting under cover when necessary. Morning circle and all activities happen outside. The children can play in the open areas, or explore the edge of the woods, or dig in the garden. Two out of five days is a nice balance. And on the other three days, the children spend over a third of the morning outside. We have already seen what a calming and centering influence it has on the children.

How can academics be part of the natural world experience in the upper grades? In Language Arts, a class may journal outside, or write poetry about a tree, or a special place. In Art, the whole class might be outside, practicing landscape drawing, or sketching the building. In Science, the natural world is the laboratory for all kinds of observation and investigations, from soil to trees to insects and more. In Theme (for example, this year the 2nd-3rd is studying the Native American Culture of the Northeast) the children may do drumming outside, or make a dream catcher outside, or play a Native American game, or learn how to listen to nature. It can be more of an effort to bring the upper grades to the natural world, but the worthwhile result is learning that sticks.

We are building a new school, on our 55 acre Camp Caravan property on Rt. 68 in Royalston. (Come see it.) In August 2018 we are moving in! At the new school, children will have plenty of opportunities to be in nature, with fields, streams, ponds, forest and a moss bog to explore.

The best teacher is direct experience, and being outside in the natural world is always direct experience, a whole level or more above a text book or a teacher's lecture. At the Village School, we challenge ourselves to bring the natural world to children. The rewards are many, but for us adults, the greatest reward is seeing how much the children benefit and grow from it. And this tells us that we are on the right path.