

Connecting to Nature in Early Childhood

West Shore Parks and Recreation's Nature Preschool Program

"Children cannot bounce off walls if we take away the walls."

~Erin Kenny

Contributed by Katherine Salmons, Arts and Culture Programmer, West Shore Parks and Recreation

West Shore Parks and Recreation's journey into intentionally nature-based early childhood programming began in the fall of 2012, with a pilot Nature Preschool program. The pilot program



consisted of a small group of four year olds spending two hours outside twice a week exploring the trails and forested areas of the Juan de Fuca Recreation Centre in Colwood, BC, a suburb of Greater Victoria.

The pilot program blossomed into a twice a week, 2.5 hour licensed program that is now offered five days a week due to its popularity and success. Nature Preschool Summer Camps are also offered each year to provide families with a snapshot of the year round program.

Nature Preschool takes place entirely outdoors, rain, wind, sleet, snow or shine, with a licensed anchor classroom that can be accessed in very inclement weather.

Educators, when comparing nature preschool to typical indoor preschool programs, have observed the following:

- Nature preschoolers develop a close knit, collaborative bond with their peers throughout the program
- Children are observed problem solving independently of adult direction or interference more frequently
- Children's balance, agility, coordination and stamina improve substantially throughout the year



- Children become aware of their own physical abilities and limitations in play which involves some risk, and are able to make appropriate judgements as to their level of engagement in challenging activities

The nature preschool program has also promoted interaction between the children and the broader community. Some examples of this interaction include:

-Greeting and getting to know others, young and old, who use the 5km gravel trail which encircles the 100+ acre recreation centre property

-Visiting local parks and greenspaces and identifying the similarities and differences in the flora, fauna and landscape of each location

-Learning about conservation and the environment from experts in the field, including the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC, the Goldstream Park Nature House, Fort Rodd Hill National Historic site, Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre, Wild Arc Wild Animal Rehabilitation Centre and others

What started as a small idea has steadily grown into a foundational program for the organization and community. Many of our other children's programs have expanded on time spent outdoors and in nature-based activities since the inception of Nature Preschool. We have also had the pleasure of seeing many older siblings pass the Nature Preschool torch down to their younger brothers and sisters.



One of those families had this to say about the program:

Parent Testimonial:

In an ideal world, I believe all children would experience at least one year of a nature based preschool program. Not only are the kids physically active and out communing with nature, they are collaboratively engaged, learning how to be in the world, with others, as themselves.

As a family, we feel incredibly blessed to have had the opportunity to participate in the Westshore Nature Program with both of our children. It's something I know they will remember forever.