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A bit about me...

- o Nature-based early childhood education consultant (Founder of Samara Early Learning)
- o Author of *Establishing a Nature-based Preschool & Preschool Beyond Walls*
- o 25+ years in education; ~10 of those as a nature-based preschool director



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Today's Agenda

1. What is a nature-based early childhood education (NbECE)?
2. Leadership in NbECE
3. Leading through challenges...
  - Administrative
  - Pedagogical



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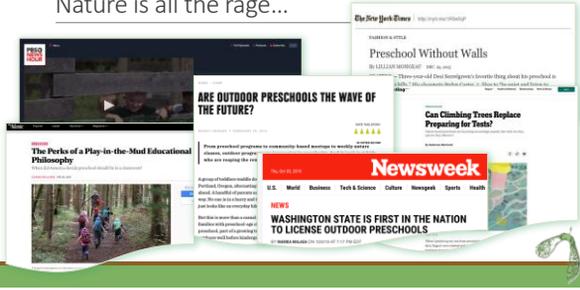
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Nature is all the rage...



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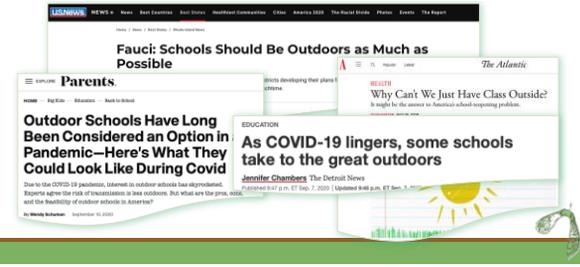
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Even more so now...



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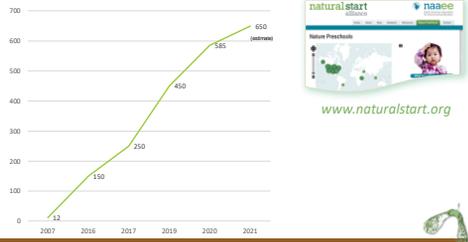
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Nature Preschools are growing!



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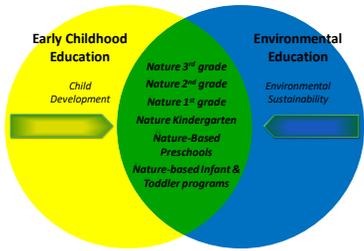
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The blending of two disciplines

Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)




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The Typical ECE Continuum of NbECE




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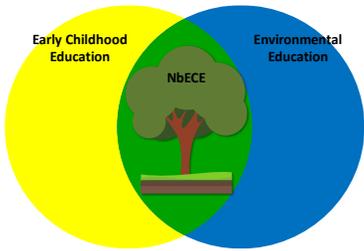
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The blending of two disciplines

Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)




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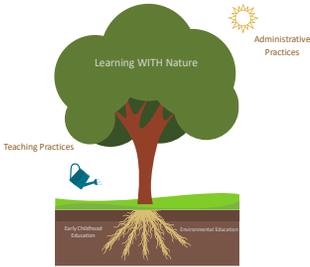
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an educational approach where experiences learning WITH nature are core to the teaching & learning

Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)




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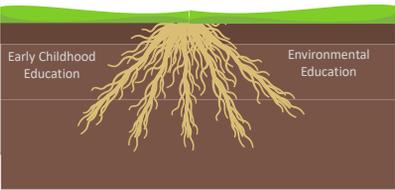
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Rooted in two disciplines




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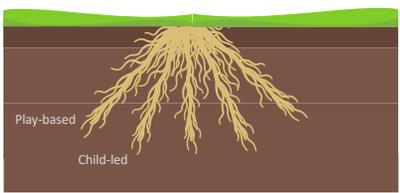
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Roots in Early Childhood Education for Whole Child Development




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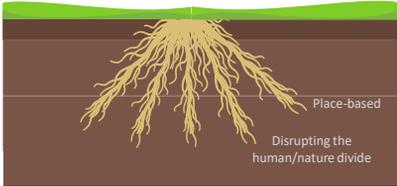
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Roots in Environmental Education for Environmental Sustainability



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Disrupting the human/nature divide



“Nature is always trying to tell us we are not so superior or independent or alone or autonomous as we may think.”

-Wendell Berry

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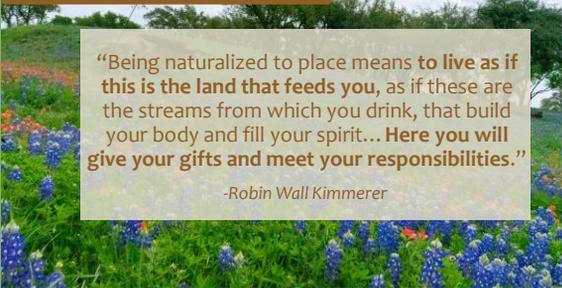
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Connection to place



“Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit... Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities.”

-Robin Wall Kimmerer

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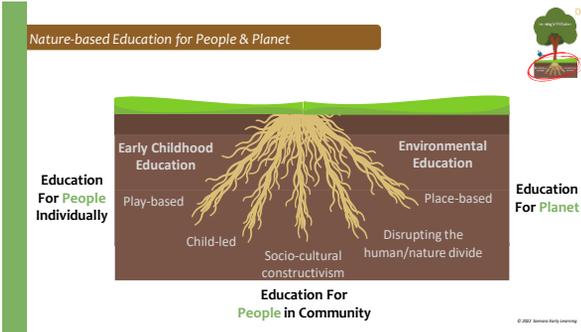
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Nature-based Pedagogy




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Three types of nature learning...



...emphasizing learning with

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Learning *in* nature

Location	Outside, Beyond
Needs nature?	No
Development	  
Led by	Teacher or child
Timeframe	May build over time
Examples	Sensory table outside; reading a story about trucks



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Learning *about* nature

Location	Inside, Outside, Beyond
Needs nature?	No
Development	
Led by	Teacher or child
Timeframe	May build over time
Examples	Life cycle of a frog; names of birds



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Learning *with* nature

Location	Outside, Beyond <i>(initially at least)</i>
Needs nature?	Yes! <i>(usually outside of teacher's plans)</i>
Development	  
Led by	Child <i>(Gives learning about more meaning)</i>
Timeframe	Builds over "nature" time
Examples	Discovering & asking questions about scat; Finding/studying a dead bird



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Assumptions in learning *with* nature

- o Nature provides more than we can plan for—serving as another teacher!
- o Children should be heard
- o Children are capable
- o Risky play is an important part of learning



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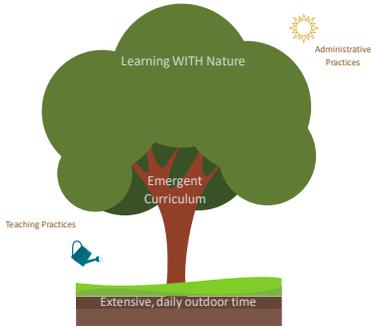
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Nature-based Pedagogy



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Child-driven emergent curriculum...



...rooted in seasonal events



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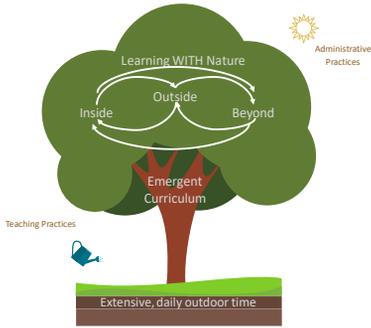
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Three spaces are a continuum of human structure



Most human-designed

Least human-designed

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- Designated areas
- Areas & materials labeled (i.e., environmental print)
- Extensive human-made materials; some natural materials

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Outside (natural play area)

- General zones not designated areas
- Not labeled for specific use (environmental print can be integrated in other ways!)
- More even balance of human-made & natural materials
- Varied sizes of loose parts to manipulate

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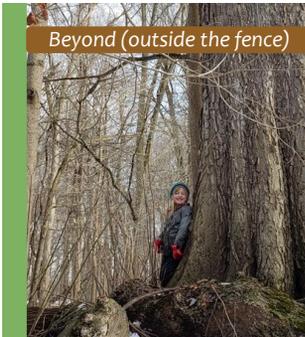
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Beyond (outside the fence)

- Designations for communicating in conversation, not labeled
- Natural materials dominate, some human-made materials
- Non-human elements as another teacher—for both children & adults

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Connecting to something bigger than themselves



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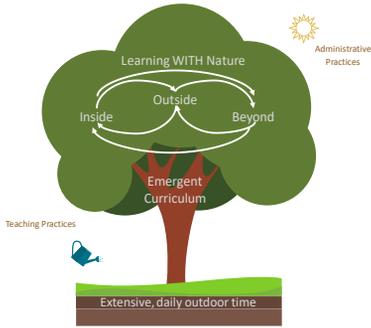
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Different models, common pedagogy

- o Models based on age, use of an indoor space, & place in the world
- o A few terms you'll hear:
  - o Nature-based preschools (generally U.S. term)
  - o Forest preschools, Forest kindergarten, Waldkindergarten
  - o Forest School
  - o Nature kindergarten
  - o Nature 1st-3rd grade



**Pedagogy is more important than program model!**



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### Two Essential Aspects of Leadership



**Administrative leadership**  
supporting the operation of the organization



**Pedagogical leadership**  
supporting teaching & learning

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### Nurturing Nature-based Early Childhood Education

- Administrative Practices**
- 📌 Policies & procedures to support pedagogy (e.g., site assessments, risky play)
  - 📌 Staff support (e.g., professional learning for teachers, team planning time)
  - 📌 Family involvement & support (e.g., newsletters, education, social events)
  - 📌 Logistical support (e.g., extra clothing)
  - 📌 Financial support (e.g., budget management, fundraising)
  - 📌 Ongoing maintenance (e.g., hazard removal)
  - 📌 Clearly communicated philosophy (to current & potential stakeholders)
- Teaching Practices**
- 📌 **Program Structure**
    - 📌 Prioritize child-led activities (i.e., more free play than teacher-led activities)
    - 📌 Prioritize outdoor time (e.g., all weather, beginning of the day)
  - 📌 **Physical Environment**
    - 📌 Authentic, place-based integration of nature in all spaces
    - 📌 Prevalence of loose parts
    - 📌 Three learning spaces (i.e., Inside, Outside, Beyond)
  - 📌 **Teacher-child Interactions**
    - 📌 Primarily child-led activities
    - 📌 Teacher-led activities connect learning I/O/B
    - 📌 Co-learners with children
    - 📌 Support of beneficial risky play

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Identify your WHY

“I/We want to add more nature-based education so that...”



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For whole child development...

- o **Physically**—balance; coordination; active; illness recovery; myopia prevention
- o **Cognitively**—engaging all of the senses; creative thinking; better concentration
- o **Socially & Emotionally**—problem solving; interacting with peers; ability to handle stress
- o **Spiritually**—connecting to something bigger than themselves
- o **Inspiring lifelong stewards!**



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Implement nature-based education so that...

- What is your WHY?
- What is your program's WHY?
- What are your co-worker's WHYS?



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Identify HOW you achieve your WHY

- Administrative**
  - o How are classes structured?
  - o How does the school support diversity, equity, & inclusion?
  - o How does the school support staff?
- Pedagogical**
  - o How do teachers prepare the classroom environment?
  - o How do teachers structure the class day?
  - o How do teacher interact with children? With families? With co-workers?



Return to WHY: "We do this so that..."



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### Today's Agenda

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### Speak to their minds & hearts

- **Share the research** (Children & Nature Network has a great research library)
- **Share the successes of other programs** (Natural Start Alliance has program spotlights)
- **Tell your story**
- **Ask them to reflect on their own childhood** (Though recognize not everyone had nature experiences)
- **Highlight WHY—nature supports whole child development**



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What counts as nature?



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Accessing nature in urban areas

- o Walk to a local park, courtyard, etc.
- o Have families drop off &/or pick up at a natural space
- o Transport the children to a more "wild" space
- o Remember, it doesn't take much space or natural materials to engage children
- o Remember WHY—disrupting the human/nature divide



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It IS possible

- Maintain an attitude of possibility
- Remember the shared goals
- Reflect on the intent of rules/standards
- Have a dialogue with regulators
- Look to other states & programs for their experiences



**Nature-based, safe, & high-quality are not mutually exclusive terms!**



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Establish Appropriate Policies & Procedures

- o Know the licensing rules!
- o Conduct Site Assessment(s)
- o Remove hazards (poison ivy, snags, etc.)
- o Conduct Benefit-Risk Assessments for activities (i.e., Why do this? What could hurt us? How prevent getting hurt?)



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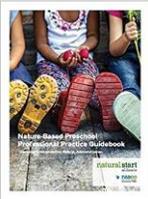
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Establish Appropriate Policies & Procedures

- o Establish protocols for higher risk activities
  - o Pre-, During, & Post-activity procedures
  - o Materials needed
- o Establish protocols for teacher-child interactions around risk
  - o Involve the children in determining risk, benefits, & protocols (i.e., Why do this? What could hurt us? How prevent that?)
  - o "Think out loud" with the children



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**Challenge:**

Convincing families children will be ready for [ ]

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Describe the learning

- Translate activities to development
- Talk in lay language not teacher language (e.g., thinking skills vs. cognitive development)
- Provide ongoing family education about the role of nature in learning (e.g., family newsletters, social media posts, family education nights, etc.)
- Encourage families to volunteer
- Highlight WHY—play supports deep, meaningful learning




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Challenge:  
Yeah, but... the weather!

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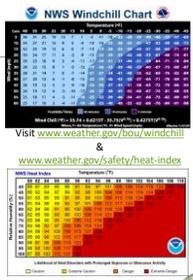
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The weather!

- Outside every day unless there is inclement or dangerous weather
- “Inclement weather” means thunder, lightning, high winds, & extreme temperatures
- Clothing is key when it comes to temperatures




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Clothing is a vital tool

- o **Have it**
  - o Purchase class sets
  - o Have a stockpile of "extras"
  - o Ask families to donate what they've outgrown
- o **Clean it**
  - o Kids & clothes are washable ☺
  - o Dry, shake & then wash (for mud)
  - o Place for dirty gear outside of classroom
- o **Store it**
- o **Remember WHY**—positive outdoor experiences in a variety of weather!



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Be intentional about sustainable practices

- Rain barrels outside for water play  
*(rather than potable water)*
- Natural loose parts rather than manufactured ones
- Real plates, utensils, etc.
- Cloth napkins & towels



**Remember WHY—modeling & developing sustainable practices**

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**Challenge:**  
Connecting learning across all three physical spaces

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Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond



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Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond



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**Challenge:**  
 Kids seem bored with outdoor play  
 or  
 Teachers aren't engaged in outdoor play

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The outdoor space IS a classroom

- o This isn't recess—adults engage as though it's a classroom!
- o Bring indoor classroom materials outside
- o Add a variety of natural & human-made loose parts
- o Changing the environment will change the play
- o Remember WHY—learning with nature where nature is another teacher



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Nature-based support DOES exist

- Identify your team's needs
- Find the right person(s) to help
  - Speakers you've heard at conferences
  - Authors of your favorite books
  - Ask other nature-based educators who they've used
  - Early Childhood Investigations Directory
  - Natural Start Alliance
- Don't limit yourself to a one-time workshop (ongoing coaching is more effective for change!)



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Where we've been

1. What is a nature-based early childhood education (NbECE)?
2. Leadership in NbECE
3. Leading through challenges...
  - Administrative
  - Pedagogical



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**Always keep in mind...**

- Your **WHY** for doing this work
- Both administrative & pedagogical leadership
- Overcoming the challenges leads to happy, healthy children, families, & teachers



**Keep changing lives!**

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Thank you! Questions?



Rachel A. Larimore, Ph.D.

[www.SamaraEL.com](http://www.SamaraEL.com)

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