



### The Joys & Challenges of Managing a Nature-Based Program

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Samara Early Learning LLC

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#### A bit about me...

- o Nature-based early childhood education consultant (Founder of Samara Early Learning LLC)
- o Author of *Establishing a Nature-based Preschool & Preschool Beyond Walls*
- o Doctoral candidate at Michigan State University
- o 10 years as founding director of Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool in Midland, MI



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#### Today's Agenda

1. What is Nature-based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)?
2. Addressing the challenges of NbECE implementation...
  - Convincing naysayers
  - Pedagogical leadership
  - Administrative leadership



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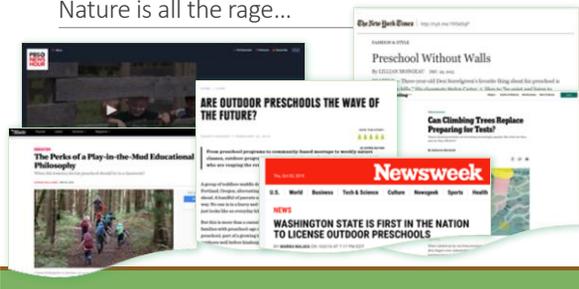
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Nature is all the rage...



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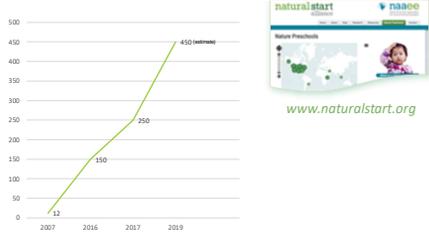
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Nature Preschools are growing!



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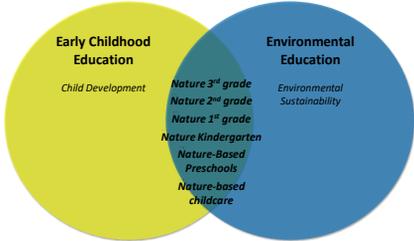
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The blending of two disciplines

Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)



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Sorting out the different models

- Nature-based preschools:**
- oThe 1 or 2 years before Kindergarten
  - oAt least 30% of time is outdoors
  - oHistorical roots in U.S. nature centers
- Forest preschools (a.k.a., “forest kindergarten”):**
- oThe 1 or 2 years before Kindergarten
  - o70-100% of time is outdoors
  - oHistorical roots in German “Waldkindergartens”



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Sorting out the different models

- Nature kindergarten:**
- oThe grade before 1<sup>st</sup> grade (5-year olds)
  - oAt least 30% of time is outdoors
- Nature 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade:**
- oGrades 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>
  - oAt least 30% of time is outdoors



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Sorting out the different models

- Forest school:**
- oUK term
  - oRegular visits to a natural area led by a Forest School certified practitioner
  - oSimilar to field trips in the U.S. to nature centers



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



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- Disrupting the human/nature binary

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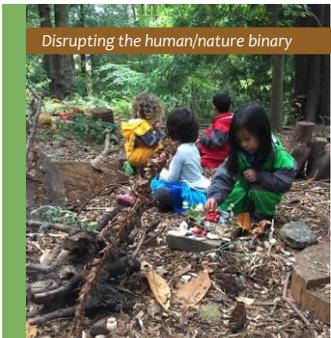
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“Nature is always trying to tell us we are not so superior or independent or alone or autonomous as we may think.”

-Wendell Berry

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What counts as nature?



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- Disruption of the human/nature binary
- Extensive, daily outdoor time
- Child-driven emergent curriculum (thus seasonal) emphasizes learning *with* nature

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Learning *in*, *about*, & *with* nature...



...emphasizing learning *with*



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Learning *in* nature

- Physically occurs outdoors
- Does not depend on nature for learning to occur
- Mostly teacher-led
- *Examples:* Sensory table outside, reading a story about trucks, drawing ballerinas



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Learning *about* nature

- o Physically occurs indoors or outdoors
- o Content focused on nature
- o Mostly teacher-led
- o May build over time
- o *Examples:* life cycle of a frog; names of birds



What is NBECE?

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Learning *with* nature

- o Physically occurs outdoors
- o Outside teacher's plans
- o Mostly child-led because it emerges out of experience
- o Builds over time
- o *Examples:* Discovery & asking questions about scat; studying a found dead bird



What is NBECE?

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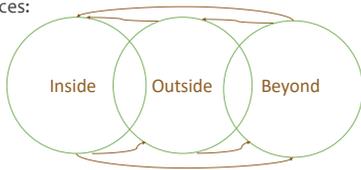
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Nature-based pedagogy



- Disruption of the human/nature binary
- Extensive, daily outdoor time
- Child-driven emergent curriculum (thus seasonal) emphasizes learning *with* nature
- Learning occurs in, among, between three physical spaces:



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Inside

- 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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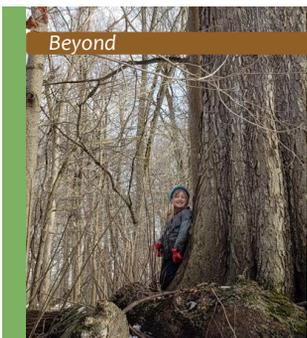
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Beyond

- 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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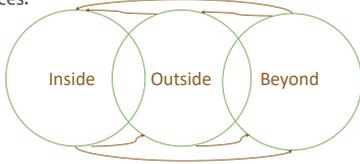
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Nature-based pedagogy



- Disrupting the human/nature binary
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The common journey of NbECE implementation

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The journey includes challenges around...



- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges

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### Challenge:

## Convincing staff &/or families of the value of NbECE

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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)
- **Ask them to reflect on their own childhood** (Though recognize not everyone had nature experiences)




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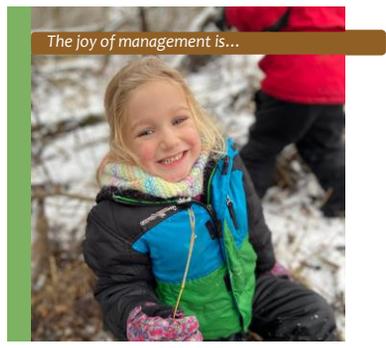
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Children's joy!

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### Challenge:

## Convincing families children will be ready for Kindergarten

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#### Articulating 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, FB posts, family education nights, etc.)
- Encourage families to volunteer



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Keeping the FUN in learning academic skills

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### Challenge:

### Yeah, but... clothing!

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Yes, clothing is a necessary 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 In the meantime, have a place for dirty gear outside of classroom
- o **Store it**



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The joy of management is...

Seeing children connect to something bigger than themselves

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The journey includes challenges around...



- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges

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### Challenge:

## Teachers aren't engaged in outdoor play



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The outdoor space IS a classroom

- This isn't recess!
- Bring indoor classroom materials outside
- Add a variety of natural & human-made loose parts
- Changing the environment will change the play



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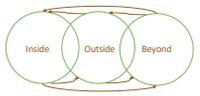
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### Challenge:

## Connecting learning across all three physical spaces



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Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond



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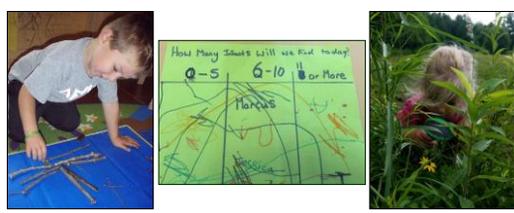
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Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond



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### Challenge:

## Documenting learning outside & beyond (in all weather)

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#### Be creative & realistic

- o Notetaking on note-size paper (not clipboards)
- o Use technology to your advantage:
  - o Video
  - o Photos
  - o Voice memos
  - o Documentation apps (if applicable)
- o Document the study as a group
- o It's okay NOT to document sometimes!!



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### Challenge:

## Implementing sustainable practices that align with nature-based values

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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



**You may have to make tradeoffs, but be intentional & thoughtful**



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The journey includes challenges around...



- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges

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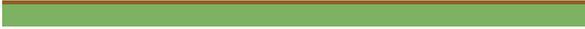
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**Challenge:**

Finding professional learning opportunities for staff



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Nature-based support DOES exist

- Identify your team’s need
- Find the right person 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
- Be creative in implementation—don’t limit yourself to a one-time workshop




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Challenge:

Working with State Regulators  
 (e.g., Licensing, Quality Rating Improvement System)

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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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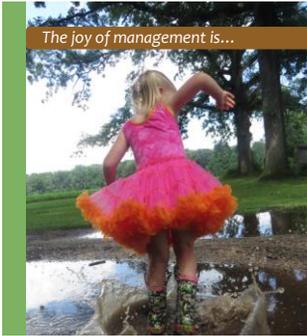
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Finding like-minded educators

*“You nature people in early childhood are just as passionate & vocal as the play people!”*

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### Challenge:

Once you’re successful, other professionals will want to visit!

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### Share with other educators...as you’re able

- Does sharing align with your mission?
- Be realistic about your constraints
- You might:
  - Limit tours to certain days of the week/month
  - Host quarterly open houses for educators only
  - Limit tours to when children aren't there
  - Create an educator's FAQ page on your website
  - Ask for a donation
  - Host a nature-based speaker for a workshop open to local educators



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The joy of management is...

Influencing the way we  
the field of early  
childhood operates

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### Where we've been

1. What is Nature-based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)?
2. Addressing the challenges of NbECE implementation...
  - Convincing naysayers
  - Pedagogical leadership
  - Administrative leadership



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### Looking to the future...

- Remember the WHY of this work
- Connect with others doing similar work
- Be patient with yourself, team, children, & families



Keep changing lives!

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Thank you! Questions?



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