



Photos by Annie Keil

## Nature as a Classroom

By Annie Keil

It's Monday after a snowstorm. The sky is blue, the sun is shining again, and all around me is a blanket of glistening snow. It's quiet and peaceful except for the gleeful delight of my two children. On the trail before us are animal tracks, running back and forth, round and round, as if they too were joyfully playing after the storm. We are the first to walk the trail this morning, and while the trek feels like stepping into a magical scene from a story book it is simply another day of school at the [Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education](#).

I love the hike into the woods to drop my children off at their

outdoor classroom nestled among the trees - especially in the winter. The more extreme weather conditions affirm for me that there is so much to be gained from exposure to all elements, for all of us. I, too, must come prepared in my winter gear to take them to school. I don't take for granted that this is an opportunity available to few children, and that I also get a dose of nature out of this experience.

I get many questions about outdoor education and nature-based learning, particularly about this time of year. People are always curious: What do they do when it's cold? My

answer: they are outside! Of course, there are particular wind and temperature conditions that necessitate taking breaks from the elements. But the children come equipped in snow gear with warm thermoses of hot lunch and tea. They, at times, get to build fires and in the afternoon, they rest inside sleeping bags on cots under the tree canopy, serenaded by the sounds of Mother Nature. They eat more in the winter and come home tired from the extra exertion, but they are oh so happy. Never have I heard the question from my children: "It's cold! What will we do?" They are experts at finding pleasure in their experience.

I've learned that one of the foundations of nature-based learning is the opportunity to connect deeply with a place as it changes across seasons and evolves over time. To watch a pond habitat go from teeming with activity to frozen begs the questions: What is going on here? Where did the animals go? Are they alive? Curiosity unfolds effortlessly in the rich environment of the outdoors, where emergent learning holds endless possibility. Yet, I hear the overarching themes that weave their learning together. They are getting an experiential sense of the interrelatedness of nature and ecosystems, of which they understand themselves to be a part.

In connecting with a place in this way, children become intimate with the passage of time. They have the experiential learning of the impermanence of states, seasons, things. The icicles they played with yesterday have melted. The white snow is now a muddy puddle to stomp in. Even the moment-to-moment shifting of the appearance and disappearance of wildlife or the sight and feel of sunlight as it warms the body and then hides behind a passing cloud. The sensory input available in a natural world is wondrously plentiful and children are continuously developing their skills of observation and awareness. My heart smiles when my kids share "I notice..." followed by whatever they are aware of in the moment. I notice that I, too, experience a stronger connection with the rhythms of the earth and a greater sense of

ease and wellbeing when I have regular, daily contact with nature. This solid foundation of awareness and an understanding of impermanence is, in my opinion, an essential component for developing resilience. In a nature-based learning setting, children have regular opportunities to practice dealing with discomfort. There are of course inherent risks to being outdoors. Indeed, my children have experienced their share of cuts, bruises, wasp stings, insect bites and poison ivy. Children are encouraged to take appropriate risks through play and grow as these challenges

empower them. I've watched firsthand as my own reserved and cautious children have developed confidence and self-mastery this way. Furthermore, kids develop autonomy and practice self-regulation through their self-care. It can be a frustrating feat for small children to learn to manage multiple layers, manipulate zippers and snaps with mittened hands, and hike with a backpack while wearing a snowsuit. In a classroom without walls, there is so much more space for children to express the full range of their emotions with ready access to co-regulation from teachers and from the environment.





Perhaps it goes without saying that it takes uniquely special educators to make nature-based learning possible, and I am inspired by the skill, commitment and character of the teachers I have encountered in my children's education. Outdoor educators bring their unique knowledge and life experience in disciplines like ornithology, mycology, entomology, outdoor

recreation, and the arts into the classroom in such a way that children internalize the message: *teachers are everywhere*, and Mother Nature is perhaps that greatest of them all.

Nature-based learning has provided my children with the opportunity not only to develop physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially, but to

do so in a context that embraces their place in the web of all life. Out of this experience they've grown a respect and admiration for the earth, an empowering sense of stewardship, and a biophilic-minded understanding of reciprocity. This is a truly special education, one that I think all people, and our planet, deserves.

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*Annie Keil is a parent of Henry (6) and Johanna (4) and has been part of the nature-based learning community at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education for 4 years. Located in Philadelphia and comprising 340 acres, the Schuylkill Center is one of the first urban environmental education centers established in the country.*

*The center offers nature-immersion learning for mixed-age (3-5 year old) preschool and kindergarten.*

*Schuylkill Center Nature Preschool.*  
<https://www.schuylkillcenter.org/preschool>.

