Environment

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The importance of being in nature, together

By CORY STEPHENSON, CORRESPONDENT

One recent Saturday morning at Northeast Elementary School in Rutland a small girl was exploring outside. Clutching a dried grass stalk, she trudged from one side of the footbridge to the other, looking for frogs and "fishing." With her mother by her side, the toddler was discovering the wonders of winter and developing important gross motor skills in the process.

This family was part of a larger group of two dozen children, parents and grandparents brought together by the Four Winds Nature Institute of Chittenden and the Childcare Provider's Network of Rutland for the event "Family Fun in Nature: Winter Wonders." Network members Teresa Fowler, Ronna McPhie and Peggy Coat joined Four Winds staff and network coordinators Liz King and Kathy Allan for the session of outdoor play.

The group spent the morning exploring tracks in the snow, searching for birds and gathering winter weeds. The wind blew briskly as the redwing blackbirds sang their "konk-karree" serenade to the approaching spring — and the school playground became a special place for exploration and discovery.

Liz King, one of the organizers, remarked, "We were so fortunate to have Mother Nature lend us a fresh snowfall to help in our animal and bird tracking. You could hear the excitement in the kids voices when they spotted a new track and tried to speculate what animal could have made it."

During early childhood we first develop a sense of wonder, an appreciation for the mystery of the natural world and respect for other creatures. Positive childhood experiences in nature — along with parents and other role models who show it value — are crucial for the later development of an environmental ethic.

According to researcher Louise Chanda, "Access to nature contributes to the health and well-being of young people." Several recent studies have confirmed that young children benefit in a variety of ways from frequent opportunities to experience nature, including reduced stress, improved concentration and self control, reduced symptoms of attention deficit disorder, improved motor coordination and more creative play.

Yet despite all the evidence showing the positive impact of time in the natural world, children today spend less time outdoors than any previous generation. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the average American child spends an average of 44 hours per week watching television, playing video games or on the computer. And it's not just the children — today's parents are also less likely to spend time outside.

Author Richard Louv calls this troubling phenomenon "nature deficit disorder." In his book "Last Child in the Woods," Louv reports that the trend is affecting many parents, childcare providers and pre-service educators — as well as young children.

Fortunately, many groups are working across Vermont to encourage children and their families to spend more time outside. And it's never too early to start. Recognizing a growing need to help early childhood educators and families include more unstructured outdoor time in their daily activities, child care network coordinators King and Allan contacted the Four Winds Nature Institute of Chittenden to offer the Family Fun in Nature workshop and event series in the Rutland area.

The series involves two trainings with professional development credit in two different seasons, each followed by family events that can earn points for family outreach in the Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS), a program that identifies providers going above and beyond state regulations. Thanks to a generous grant from Jane's Trust, Four Winds is able to offer the Family Fun in Nature programs throughout Vermont and in other states as well.

In February several members of the Childcare Provider's Network of Rutland participated in a three-hour workshop on the benefits and challenges to play-based outdoor exploration for children. Participants trained for the family event to be held at the Northeast Elementary School.

Many talked about their own plans to "expands my caution bubble," "stand back and let children explore" and "take longer walks in the woods."

Several other groups across the state have also participated in the Four Winds professional development program Knee High Nature, designed to increase children's awareness of the natural world through investigation, creative play and plenty of interactive time outside. The units draw from children's own backyard experiences — with many hands-on opportunities that encourage them to raise questions, explore objects and materials, spend time outside, and share and discuss their ideas.

Through such efforts, not only are young children getting more opportunities for unstructured time outside — those who care for them are learning how to be with children in nature as part of their professional development.

Whether it's the Friday hike program at Barstow Memorial School in Chittenden, enjoying the natural "playscape" at Thatcher Brook Primary School in Waterbury or designing and building the Foster School Nature Studies Center in the town forest, young and old alike are benefiting from time together outside.

As King observes, "Regardless of the season, nature can offer all of us some pretty amazing things to do and see — and all for free!"

Think back to your earliest and most powerful childhood memories. Likely some of them involve one or two special outdoor spots. As you spent time in the woods, on the farm or in the backyard, you were gaining valuable lifelong learning skills, discovering a sense of wonder and laying the groundwork for assuming stewardship of your landscape. Such experiences are equally vital for today's children and future generations.

All it takes when we go outside together is to interact with the natural world.

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ON THE NET
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Local child care providers partnered with Four Winds Nature Institute to get children and their families outside for a recent family fun day in Rutland. Many groups are working across Vermont to encourage children and their families to spend more time in nature together.