

Forest play connects children and nature

By Dave Verhulst, Nature Connection Director, Forest Play



Sometimes I'm amazed at how a question can influence what we do in our lives.

I've worked in the field of interpretive guiding for the past 14 years. I was studying nature connection mentoring on the side as a way of improving my guiding and I found myself using the skills a lot with my own children (currently 6 & 4 years old). In 2011, people in our circle of parenting friends asked if I would offer nature connection programs for their kids. My initial response was to smile and politely decline.

Then a friend sent me a link to a documentary on Forest Kindergartens in Norway and I thought, "How come no one is doing that here in Alberta?"

Coincidentally, I re-connected with Corey Stevens, a friend I'd met years ago and who shared my interest in running nature programs for kids. Together we ran our first pilot Forest Play program in August of 2011. Based on the success of our pilot programs, our passion for this work, and both of our schedules opening up to do this work more regularly, we dove in and started offering more Forest Play programs. We ran our first Forest Play program for 4-10-year-olds in 2011 and now offer after-school and summer programs for children aged 4-10. We also have a great partnership with Canmore's Alpenglow Community School, a Waldorf-inspired outdoor school.

My belief is that nature connection isn't just a "nice-to-have," but a "must-have" for children to become, healthy, innovative and resilient in today's rapidly changing world.

The idea of having young children outdoors on a daily and/or weekly basis during and/or after school is not new. Forest schools were introduced in Sweden, Denmark and other European countries in the 1950s. They were introduced to the UK in the 1990s and in Canada in 2008.

There are many good reasons for this increasing trend in Forest schools – books like Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* brought public attention to the concept of "nature deficit disorder" and to the research illustrating why we need nature connection.

- Among other benefits, children who spend time in nature have:
- Improved cognitive abilities and well developed imaginations;
 - Reduced stress;
 - Enhanced physical fitness and sense of well-being;
 - Increased knowledge and understanding of the natural environment.

Nature programs also help children with ADHD.*

The evidence to prove that being outside is good for a child's health and well-being is there in spades and I'm surprised we don't have more programs in Canada. Yet, I also know from personal experience as a parent and educator that how those kids spend their time outside is just as important as getting them out there.

There are a few key things that make Forest Play (and Forest Schools) different from other outdoor programs. Since the same children join us in the same setting on a regular basis over an extended period of time, they can develop a personal bond with the landscape.

Forest Play is also play-based and child directed. Our job as mentors is to discover the interests of children in our group. We tailor our activities to those interests specifically looking for edges of comfort, knowledge and skill (social or physical). Using seasonally grounded activities, questions, games and stories, we gently pull them beyond those edges so they learn without knowing it.

It is inspiring to be a part of these programs and humbling to witness the connections between the kids and the natural world develop. Our hope is that the kids we work with will not only be healthier because of their connection with nature, they'll also develop the tools they need to share their gifts with their community.

For more information about the program, go to canmoreforestplay.com

*For a comprehensive list of nature and health related research, see: <http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/CNNHealthBenefits2012.pdf>



Above and below: Forest Play participants exploring the outdoors. All photos courtesy of the Forest Play program



Above, below, and right: Children in the Forest Play program enjoying their experience in the outdoors. All photos courtesy of the Forest Play program



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