Two bright-eyed, four-year-old girls sat patiently waiting for the speech therapist to ask her next question. The therapist’s focus for the day was the B sound, so she placed an image of a bird on the table in front of the girls. She then pointed and asked, “What’s this?” The two four-year-olds proudly answered, “Woodpecker!” They were correct. The therapist was confused—most four-year-olds would have said bird. What the therapist had forgotten was that she wasn’t working with typical four-year-olds. She was working with students in Chippewa Nature Center’s (CNC) Nature Preschool.
CNC’s Nature Preschool, located in Midland, Michigan, is one of approximately 20 nature-based preschools in the U.S. associated with a nature center. Nature-based preschools are licensed preschools that strive to provide meaningful connections with the natural world through activities that are developmentally appropriate for young children. A nature-based preschool goes well beyond the mom-and-tot program to create emotional and intellectual connections between children and the outdoors over a nine-month period. At CNC, three- and four-year-old children attend two to four days per week, September to May, for three or seven hours daily.

For years, interpreters have provided programming for young children. Typically these programs are short, one-time encounters. In nature-based preschools, however, program effectiveness is amplified because of a minimum of 180 contact hours between children and teacher. New Canaan Nature Center in Connecticut and Kalamazoo Nature Center’s Nature’s Way preschool in Michigan have both been operating for more than 35 years. More recent well-established programs include Dodge Nature Center in West St. Paul, Minnesota, Schlitz Audubon Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan. All of these programs have shown that nature-based preschools are powerful interpretive programs as well as lucrative business decisions.

Low windows, lots of natural light, and natural items such as plants bring the outdoors inside.

Why are nature preschools such an effective interpretive model? Well, when it comes to blending environmental and early childhood education, these nature-based preschools are the perfect partnership. Early childhood education focuses on the first eight years of a child’s life, a period of incredible growth, which includes their cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development. Environmental education aims to provide knowledge and skills, along with an emotional connection, to lead individuals to environmentally responsible behaviors. While each of these disciplines is strong in its own right, when combined in a nature-based preschool they are suddenly more powerful than the sum of their parts.

Intellectually, nature provides an ever-changing environment for children to explore and discover in order to build on their existing knowledge and experience. In nature, children learn to observe the world around them, and then develop the ability to sort and classify. A prime example of this is the girls above
who knew there are many kinds of birds and were able to identify and classify the bird shown as part of the woodpecker group.

Nature is a great teacher for a child’s physical development as well. A wet log that was dry yesterday suddenly provides a new challenge for the child in terms of balance and coordination. Walking and running over uneven terrain, through a thick understory, or around a squishy wetland all provide different opportunities for physical development—from sheer muscle strength to body control and balance.

It’s in early childhood when a child’s sense of wonder is at its peak. Nature provides endless opportunities for children to find wonder and in turn ask questions about the world around them. This helps build their intellectual capacity while creating a sense of place in the world. This sense of place contributes to their social and emotional development, and ultimately their sense of self. Students also develop their social and emotional skills by interacting, discovering, creating, and problem solving with other children and teachers.

Each nature-based preschool program is unique in the details of its operation, but all follow the same general format and philosophy. Successful programs emphasize daily outdoor experiences, teachers as discoverers alongside the children, and season-based learning.

At CNC’s Nature Preschool, a typical class day starts outdoors in one of our two natural play areas. These play areas include very few elements you would see in a “traditional” playground, such as slides and swings. Instead, the play areas include lots of natural elements and “loose parts,” such as logs, rocks, and leaves. These loose parts lead to creative, inventive play. Sandbox, a stump circle, for group meetings, a painting easel, a wigwam frame, and hollow logs are some of the other items you’ll find.

Once all of the children have arrived and had a chance for free, unstructured play, the teachers will gather the class at the stump circle to prepare for the group adventure outside of the play area. The exact adventure varies seasonally and focuses on the natural events of that particular season. In spring, the hikes often focus on tapping maple trees and then collecting the sap. In the fall the kids may head out with their teachers in search of insects.

All of this outdoor time adds up to about half the class period, although on really nice days in the spring and fall, the entire class is held outdoors. Classroom time includes a large group meeting, which often involves a story, song, or discussion of the group adventure. In March, for example, the large group time usually focuses on counting the gallons of sap collected that day towards the seasonal total. The large group time is followed by snack.

After snack the children have one hour of uninterrupted choice time in the classroom. At Nature Preschool, we use Creative Curriculum, which helps us prepare the classroom environment and is our formal assessment model. Creative Curriculum includes 10 different interest areas in the classroom, such as blocks, dramatic play, sand and water, discovery, and art. During choice time children can explore and move between any of the interest areas at their own choosing. Even indoors we integrate nature such as pinecone collections in the discovery area, squirrel calls in the music area, and field guides in the library.

The last part of the class includes a
small group time followed by a final group meeting and departure. Small group is where a teacher will work with a group of four to six children on a particular skill or activity. For example, they might sort worms by different lengths. In order to remain developmentally appropriate, this activity is kept short—15 minutes maximum for most groups. After small group time, the children head home for the day.

At the end of each day, children run to tell their parents of the adventures they had. “Mom, I found 10 worms today!” or, “Guess what, Dad, we saw a dead deer carcass today!” Regularly we hear parents raving about how their child wowed dinner guests with natural history trivia. The ability to recite nature facts is not our primary goal, but it shows children’s desire to learn and their ability to absorb information. Parents also regularly ask when we’re going to start a kindergarten or an elementary school. While we’re not going to take that project on anytime soon, it’s great feedback that children and parents are benefiting from the program.

A nature-based preschool is a significant institutional undertaking. Careful attention must be paid to state licensing requirements, specialized staffing, facility requirements, etc. This may not be feasible for every interpretive site. However, every site can integrate early childhood best practices into its programming—discovery-based, child-driven, and so forth. Sites can also increase the number and length of contacts made with preschool-aged children. Early childhood and environmental education are a powerful combination if done right, and especially if combined in a nature-based preschool setting. After all, it was four-year-old Nature Preschool students who knew it wasn’t just a bird in the picture—it was a woodpecker!

Rachel Larimore, director of education at Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan, created the center’s Nature Preschool in 2007. She was responsible for all of the on-the-ground work to bring the program to reality—a program that now serves more than 60 three- and four-year-old children. She is also the author of a forthcoming InterpPress book due out this fall on creating nature-based preschools. Rachel can be reached at rlarimore@chippewanaturecenter.org.