

Inviting all children into the wild:

Supporting Inclusion in Nature-Based Education

The benefits of nature-based education, particularly in early childhood, have become well recognized in recent years. There is also an increasing public understanding of the importance of nature for all learners, including those with physical disabilities, learning disabilities and social/emotional challenges, as well as developmental delays. Children who are identified as having special education needs may require supports for participation in outdoor nature-based programs. Educators, administrators and parents, who see the overall benefits, can make access to the outdoors possible by implementing the suggestions that follow.



Lisa Burris, Turn Back Time, Inc., Paxton, MA

What is Nature-Based?

Nature-based education in early childhood comes in many forms; there's not one particular way of doing it and it must be adapted to meet the environments, programs and resources available. Simply **defined**, it uses the natural world to inform and direct learning, and children spend substantial time engaged with nature. While some teachers offer significant time for outdoor play and learning on a weekly basis, others make experiential outdoor time a central part of the curriculum each day. Nature-based looks different depending on the site of the program. A family or small childcare group that visits a local park every day could be nature-based, just as well as a pre-K with ready access to 20 acres of nature preserve.

Rachel Tenney, MEd is an educator working with preschool students in Brooklyn, New York. As founder of Robins & Roots, they currently co-lead inclusive nature-based preschool programs in Prospect Park. They also work as a Special Education Itinerant Teacher with preschool students and offer private assessments and teacher support to programs and families. Rachel completed research and visits for this document as part of their coursework at Antioch University New England, receiving a Certificate in Nature-based Early Childhood Education in December 2020. If you are interested in having further discussion about inclusion in your nature-based program, please email them (rttenney@antioch.edu) and seek out fellow educators through the [Inside-Outside](#) network.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusive education understands that all children are capable of learning with their peers and all children benefit from learning alongside those who have differing abilities. Rather than exclude or separate children with diagnosed or undiagnosed disabilities, these children are **included** in a learning environment with their typically developing peers. Children receive individualized support and modified expectations to maintain their engagement with the curriculum and their peers. Inclusion grew out of the Disabilities Rights Movement of the 1970s that led to the passage of the now named Individuals with Disabilities Act (**IDEA**) in 1975. Recognized internationally by **UNICEF**, this US federal law mandates that children have a right to public education in the least restrictive environment possible. Inclusion is supported by this legislation and is in direct response to previous trends and laws that led to the segregation and institutionalization of children with disabilities. Most public schools are inclusive environments, with varying amounts of integration of children with disabilities with their undiagnosed peers. In early education, inclusion is not required in private or religiously affiliated programs.

Benefits of Nature-Based Education

There is a growing body of research that looks at the positive impacts of nature-based education for all children. Researchers cite examples of improved academic outcomes, better mental health and improve executive functioning. A summation of many research efforts shows improvements in many areas, including attention in children with ADHD, better self-control for children with impulsive behaviors, and quieter, safer learning environments for children with histories of negative behaviors in traditional classrooms. It's clear that the children who might be quickly excluded due to logistical or staffing challenges are the ones poised to benefit the most from time in nature.



Hannah French, Rowe Elementary School, Rowe, MA

Making it Work: Quick How-Tos for Inclusion in Nature-Based Programs

Inviting all children into the wild requires preparation and planning. The following practices, gleaned from visits to inclusive nature-based programs and my experience as a Special Education Itinerant Teacher, provide a starting place for educators who want to make their programs more inclusive.

Overstaff: Overstaffing is probably the single most crucial aspect of inclusion. As children need individualized attention and time and space away from a larger group, having enough adults to safely maintain ratios is essential. Even if regulations and state standards allow more children per adult, extra staff can make inclusion feasible. Maintaining a 1:4 or 1:5 ratio and a minimum of three teachers or adults with a smaller group enables inclusion. Adults do not all have to be trained and employed teachers; parent or family volunteers, teachers in training or vetted community volunteers, such as high school students with service-learning programs or job training individuals can all offer support.

Experienced Staff: Programs benefit from having staff that are experienced in working with children with special education needs and who can provide a supportive mix of consistency and flexibility. Commitment to the program and a clear understanding of the program's goals help staff support all children. Program staff should participate in ongoing professional development for inclusion and be compensated for the time needed to plan for an inclusive class and participate in team or family meetings. When other adults are welcomed to join the group, such as parents or community helpers, teachers or administrators need to prepare them to be flexible and follow teachers' lead, particularly around behavioral expectations.

Plan Ahead: Planning ahead for individual child's needs as well as the overall expectations of the day are essential for "best day possible" in a nature-based program. Teachers can pre-trip (visit before without children) if an outdoor destination is out of the ordinary for their group, both for adults to better anticipate any sensory or behavioral needs en route or at the unfamiliar site and to provide children with an accurate picture of what's coming up during their day. By talking out a plan (or using visuals or singing or signing), teachers give all children a chance to know what's coming and be prepared.

Be Flexible! Planning ahead works only so far because sometimes, in the moment, a child requires flexibility. For example, at one program, skilled staff who knew the plan for the day stayed in regular communication as the children shifted throughout the space. At one point, a teacher signaled colleagues to say that she was hanging back with two children who were going at their own pace. The teaching team knew that asking these two to keep up or stay with a group might lead to an outburst, so they were flexible to meet the needs. The children and teacher arrived happily at the final destination without incident only minutes after the main group.



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