



by
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Sorting Out the
Terms and
Concepts
Within Nature-
based Early
Childhood
Education



HELPING NATURE-BASED EDUCATION TAKE FLIGHT

We're thrilled you've downloaded this document to learn more about nature-based early childhood education (NbECE). There are many, many young children who don't currently have frequent, ongoing experiences in the natural world. Educators, parents, grandparents, and others who care about young children taking steps to learn about the power of nature is a huge positive step for these children.

The following pages are intended to provide an overview of the terms and concepts within NbECE. We hope it provides clarity for you and your work. It's also important to remember that through it all pedagogy is more important than a particular program model. Our goal is to provide child meaningful, ongoing experiences for learning *with* nature. There are many program models doing just that and we're so grateful for them all!

Good luck on your nature-based education journey and let us know if we can help you along the way.

In the meantime, keep changing lives!

Rachel

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WHAT IS NATURE-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Nature-based early childhood education (NbECE) is a broad term describing the integration of two disciplines—early childhood and environmental education (Bailie, 2010; Larimore, 2011a). See Figure 1 for an illustration of this integration. This approach includes any program model which provides young children, ages 0-8, extensive daily outdoor time, operates with nature as the curriculum’s

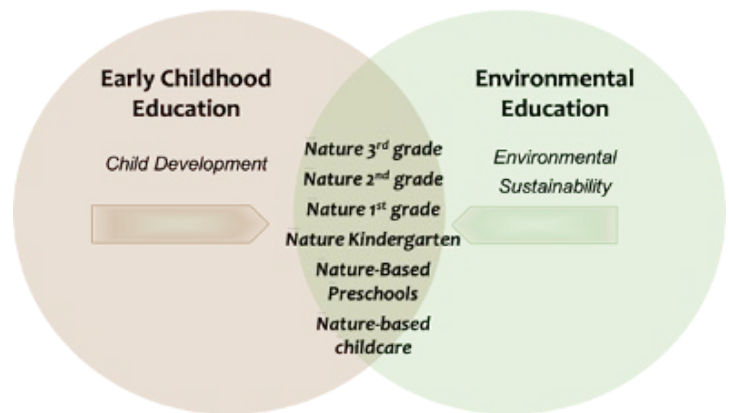


Figure 1 NbECE--Integration of Two Disciplines

organizing concept (Larimore, 2016; Sobel, 2014), follows a curriculum which emerges from children’s interest in seasonal events (Andrachuk et al., 2014; Kenny, 2013; Larimore, 2011a; R. Moore & Cosco, 2014; Sobel, 2016; Warden, 2012), and emphasizes learning with nature rather than learning in or about nature (Larimore, 2018, 2019; Warden, 2015). This includes programs serving children who are infants all the way through third grade. In addition to these pedagogical factors, teachers in nature-based contexts are co-learners with the children and partners in play as they discover and explore the natural world. The daily outdoor experiences and teacher-child interactions provide the foundation for learning which crosses the boundaries of the physical spaces indoors, outdoors, and in more wild spaces beyond the outdoor play space (Warden, 2015). Experiences in these spaces provide opportunities for learning in, about, and with nature (Warden, 2015). In my 2018 article “Using Principles of Nature-Based Preschools to Transform Your Classroom” published in *Young Children* magazine, I explained the difference between these ideas as: “Learning in nature means the activity could easily be conducted in any environment—including indoors. Learning about is when children are in nature, but the emphasis is on learning facts about the natural world. This contrasts with learning with nature when the learning is a direct result of moments provided by the natural world” (p. 36). I describe all of these pedagogical elements of NbECE as the “nature-based approach” or, as Claire Warden describes it, “nature pedagogy.”

Within the broad umbrella of NBECE are a variety of program models including nature-based preschools, forest preschools, forest kindergartens, and nature kindergartens. Integration of nature-based early childhood education “at different depths and frequencies results in programs falling somewhere on a continuum of nature integration that includes physical spaces, time spent in those spaces, and teacher–child interactions” (Larimore, 2018, p. 35). Figure 2 illustrates a continuum of practice within early childhood education and Figure 3 within environmental education.



Figure 2 Continuum of nature integration in early childhood education



Figure 3 Continuum of early childhood integration in environmental education

In 2010, there were 12 known programs in the United States operating with a nature-based early childhood education approach (Bailie, 2012). With the establishment of the Natural Start Alliance in 2013, there was suddenly a place for programs to announce their use of the approach. The numbers indicated 160 in early 2016 (Merrick, 2016) and more than 250 at the end of 2017 (North American Association for Environmental Education, 2017). It should be noted these numbers are self-designated connected to a nature-based early childhood approach and do not capture what model a program implements (e.g., nature-based preschool, forest preschool). See Figure 4 for a visual presentation of the umbrella term of early childhood environmental education, nature-based early childhood education, and program models within these terms. This diagram is very much a work in progress that is evolving as the field develops.

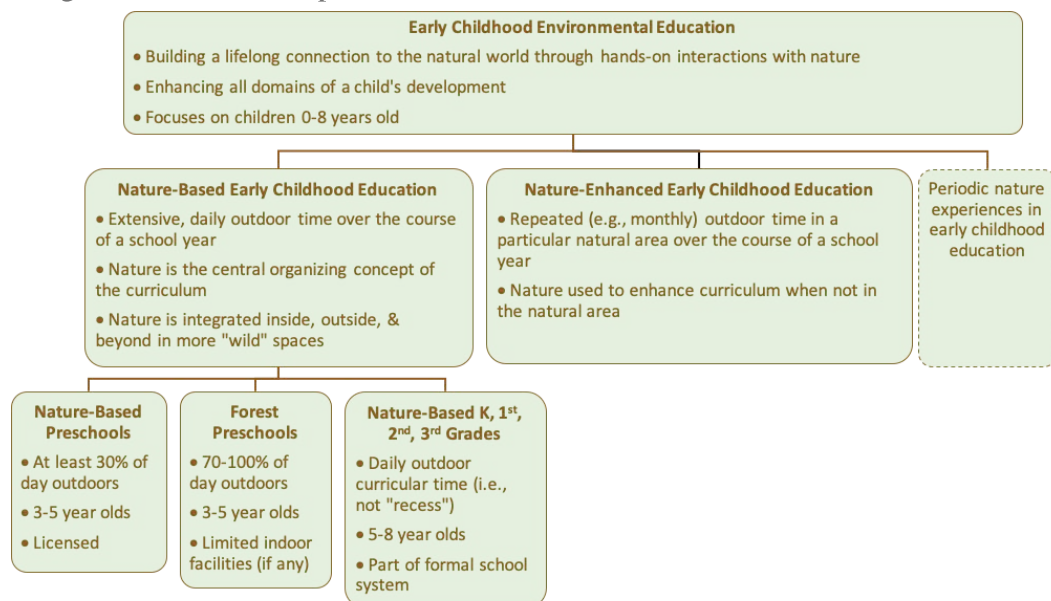


Figure 4 Taxonomy of early childhood environmental education; Based on Larimore, R. A. (2016). *Defining Nature-Based Preschool*. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 4(1), 33–37.



WHAT IS A NATURE-BASED PRESCHOOL?

Nature-based preschools, sometimes simply referred to as nature preschools, are licensed early childhood programs for 3-5 year olds where at least 30% of the class day is held outside, nature is infused into all aspects of the program, and the pedagogy emphasizes inquiry-based learning through play and hands-on discovery. This means the curriculum is emergent (i.e., based on children's interests), but given the frequent outdoor time experiences are typically rooted in the seasonal happenings of the natural world. Additionally, nature is integrated into the indoor spaces, and the play areas have an overall appearance of a natural area rather than structured play equipment. Nature-based preschools include time spent beyond the designated play area, nature infused into the indoor spaces, and with nature as the driving theme of the curriculum (Bailie, 2010; Green Hearts, 2014; Larimore, 2011b, 2011a; R. C. Moore, 2014). Another way of describing this is nature is integrated into learning “indoors,” “outdoors,” and “beyond” (Warden, 2015). Nature-based preschools are different from forest preschools which include longer periods of time outdoors (70-100%) and limited use, if any, of indoor space (Larimore, 2016; Sobel, 2014). This nature-based preschool model originated in the United States with the first nature-based preschool at New Canaan Nature Center in Connecticut in 1967. Until the early 2000s many referred to this model as nature-center based preschools (Bailie, 2010) and then the language shifted to nature-based preschools (Larimore, 2011). In many cases this history still influences the balance between learning in, about, or with nature in particular nature-based preschools. Today there are more than 250 preschools that self-identify as being nature-based. (A list of current nature-based preschools is maintained by the [Natural Start Alliance](#).)

WHAT IS A FOREST PRESCHOOL?

Forest preschools are very similar to nature-based preschools in that they typically serve 3-5 year olds. In a forest preschool, however, 70-100% of the day is spent outdoors (Larimore, 2016; Sobel, 2014). As a result, the indoor space is typically less developed and primarily serves as a shelter from inclement weather. Like nature-based preschools, nature is infused into all aspects of the program, and the pedagogy emphasizes learning through play and hands-on discovery that emerges from the children's interests. Historically forest preschools are rooted in European models such as Germany's Waldkindergartens, Swedish Skogsmulle (Sobel, 2014) and Danish Udeskole. Thus, many of these forest preschools refer to themselves as “forest kindergarten” which is the English translation from German. In U.S. contexts I prefer to use “forest preschool” as it clarifies the age range and the fact these programs are typically outside of formal school systems which include kindergarten (i.e., the year before First grade).



WHAT ABOUT NATURE-BASED KINDERGARTEN, FIRST, SECOND & THIRD GRADES?

Any student or parent who experiences a nature-based preschool inevitably wants to attend a nature-based kindergarten (and first grade, second grade...). Like nature-based preschools, nature-based kindergartens include daily outdoor time as part of their curriculum. Nature is also brought into the classroom through physical materials, but also in the selection of reading materials, topics for small group activities, and so forth. In other words, nature is infused into all aspects of the classroom and serves as a tool to achieve learning outcomes—matching the goals and pedagogy of the umbrella approach of nature-based early childhood education.

WHAT ABOUT TERMS LIKE "NATURE KINDERGARTEN" & "FOREST SCHOOL"?

It should be noted that all of the terms and concepts within nature-based early childhood education have historic and cultural influences on the meaning of a particular program model. In other words, it's important to dig into the pedagogical practices of a particular school to understand how they teach young children rather than relying on the title of the program model. It's also important to remember different cultures have different terms for programs at specific age levels. For example, in Scotland the term "nature kindergarten" aligns very closely with the U.S. model of "nature-based preschool" in terms of ages served. Additionally, many educators, myself included, prefer to use "nature" in the descriptor instead of "forest" as it implies openness to a variety of ecosystems. Finally, a word about the term "Forest School." This term sometimes is used interchangeably with "forest preschool" and "forest kindergarten," but this is an inaccurate use of the formal term. "Forest School" is a specific outdoor education approach started in the United Kingdom. Forest schools take public school children to a nearby natural area on a regular basis for half to a whole day at a time, and often serve children older than 8 years old (Andrachuk et al., 2014; Maceachren, 2013; R. Moore & Cosco, 2014; Warden, 2012). Thus, while there may be philosophical and pedagogical similarities, Forest Schools are a separate model from nature-based education.



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ABOUT US

Samara Early Learning (SEL) helps early childhood professionals implement high-quality nature-based education. Through a variety of professional learning opportunities, we help educators overcome barriers in order to provide young children with rich nature-based learning experiences. These opportunities include written publications, workshops, speaking engagements, e-courses, and more. We offer these services because we believe all young children have a right to high-quality nature-based early childhood education for their whole development.

“Samara” (pronounced “sam-er-uh” or “suh-mair-uh”) is the scientific term for an indehiscent, usually one-seeded, winged fruit from a plant such as the elm or maple tree. In other words, it's a maple seed. We use the maple samara in our logo for a several reasons—all of which are reflective of our company values. Visit our website to learn more!



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