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NATURE IS THE TEACHER

THE BLOSSOMING OF FOREST SCHOOLS

By Sandi Schwartz



Children learn from hands-on activities at Little Forest Explorers in San Francisco.

COURTESY PHOTO

Children are spending more time on screens than ever before, which means less time playing freely outside.

This has led to nature-deficit disorder, a term coined by Richard Louv in his book “Last Child in the Woods,” which highlights the negative effects of spending less time outdoors. Research shows that spending time in nature helps toddlers and preschoolers develop essential skills to help them flourish, while also supporting emotional regulation, encouraging curiosity and imagination, and fostering creativity.

To nurture a love of nature, some parents enroll their children in an early childhood program that prioritizes outdoor play. They often turn to forest schools, also known as forest kindergarten, outdoor nursery or nature school. In the Bay Area, there are several options for young children to reap the numerous benefits of this type of program.

What is a Forest School?

Originating in Denmark in the 1950s, a forest school is a progressive, alternative education model that takes place primarily outdoors. The Forest School Association defines it as a child-centered learning process that happens through regular, long-term time in nature.

Children enrolled in these types of programs are encouraged to play, explore and learn in natural outdoor spaces no matter what the weather.

Nature itself is the teacher, says David Calabrese, owner and director of Little Earthlings Forest School in San Francisco. “There are no structures, sand boxes, manipulative tables, dress up, cars, blocks, toys, materials or lesson plans other than what the children naturally gravitate to.”

“The trees, the landscapes, water features, woodland creatures, weather terrain and their own imaginations drive and determine the growth and development they engage in eagerly, actively and industriously every day,” he explains. This provides a dynamic and varied educational environment to challenge and empower students to be more curious and learn in ways that are simply not possible in a traditional classroom.

Forest vs. Traditional Schools

While traditional schools typically focus on structure and following rules, forest schools flip the script. “Research shows that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that handles self-regulation and problem-solving, develops through choice and trial-and-error, not by following orders,” explains Laura Engel, founder and director of Little Forest Explorers in San Francisco.



COURTESY PHOTO

There’s less structure in the curriculum at Little Forest Explorers where children spend a lot of time hiking outdoors.

At a forest school, a child might spend 30 minutes balancing on a log, falling and trying again. In that process, they are wiring their brain for resilience. “Parents are shocked to see how much their child grows when nothing is scripted,” she says.



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– LAURA ENGEL, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF SAN FRANCISCO’S LITTLE FOREST EXPLORERS

This experiential learning helps them be more confident in their physical bodies, while also developing essential cognitive, social, emotional, sensory and language skills. This is all done in a quieter, more relaxing environment than a typical classroom. Finally, forest schools tend to have high adult to child ratios, allowing the children to enjoy activities safely with all the support they need.

Benefits

Children of any age, exceptionality, ability or background can thrive at a forest school. Preschoolers benefit from creative, sensory, spatial and motor development, while older

children in primary school can strengthen foundations for continued personal, social and educational development, according to the Forest School Foundation.

Both the time outside in nature and the freedom to engage in free play are the crux of how forest schools benefit children.

“The science is clear. Play is how they learn and how their bodies heal and thrive,” says Engel. Through long hours of uninterrupted, child-led, outdoor, calculated risk-play in all kinds of weather, children gain stronger motor skills, executive function, emotional steadiness, self-confidence, physical endurance and social confidence. “They learn how to solve problems without an adult rushing in to rescue them, and they learn how to make mistakes without being told how to avoid them,” she adds.

What’s less talked about are the benefits for parents as well. Parenting today is exhausting, with many parents feeling guilt about the use of screens, the pressure to enroll children in numerous enrichment classes and the fear of falling behind.

“One of the biggest gifts of forest school is that it takes that weight off,” says Engel. “Parents tell me all the time, ‘I don’t feel as guilty about screentime anymore because my child spends hours outside every day.’ And they’re right. No child in a conventional program is getting this much real-world play.”

They feel like the relationship with their children is less strained and they don’t have to micromanage every moment. Engel says growth isn’t just reserved for the children; parents evolve right alongside them.

Forest School Curriculum

Parents shouldn’t worry about their children playing all day. Forest schools have curriculum, too. Topics in the curriculum typically cover the natural environment and its relation to human culture and geography, as well as math and communications.

At Little Forest Explorers, the framework rests on four pillars: confidence, autonomy, resilience and self-awareness. While that doesn’t include worksheets and sticker charts, when a fort collapses or two children resolve an argument over a stick without an adult stepping in, that’s the lesson.

“The mud, scraped knees, messy negotiations, expanded vocabulary and communication skills, knowledge of flora and fauna, sense of navigation and care of nature are proof of learning,” explains Engel.

Forest school children also learn how to use important tools through hands-on activities, says Calabrese. “Using tools and natural materials for carving, whittling, sawing, hammering and building contribute to an expansive sense of self-esteem and identity.”

Children are constantly learning about science and nature



COURTESY PHOTO

Teachers at Little Forest Explorers help kids learn about confidence, autonomy, resilience and self-awareness.

directly. “We regularly experience coyotes, gophers, crawfish, waterfowl, raptors, dogs, birds, honeybees and wasps. I am an herbalist, so I teach them about edible, medicinal and poisonous plants,” says Calabrese.

Here are some examples of forest school lessons from the Forest School Foundation:

- * Discovering the relationship between earth and sky.
- * Learning about the role of trees in nature and society.
- * Noticing the changes of a natural landscape through the seasons.
- * Recognizing and identifying local flora and fauna.
- * Creating toys, tools and handcrafts with found natural objects.
- * Playing imaginative games using role play.
- * Counting objects or looking for mathematical patterns in nature.
- * Listening to stories and singing songs.
- * Drawing scenes or arranging natural items to create an image.
- * Spending time on self-reflection and meditation.



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– DAVID CALABRESE, OWNER AND DIRECTOR OF LITTLE EARTHLINGS FOREST SCHOOL IN SAN FRANCISCO

Choosing the Right School

Choosing the right forest school for your family is about finding a place where your child feels safe, supported and inspired to learn through nature, says Engel. “Each program has its own philosophy and approach, so it’s important to align with one that reflects your values and your child’s needs.”

Follow these steps to determine if a particular forest school is a fit for you and your children:

- * Ask for personal recommendations and read reviews about forest schools.
- * Learn about the school's philosophy and how they implement it.
- * Ask if the children or teachers lead the play activities.
- * Take a tour to see how the school operates. "Watch for the interactions between adults and children," suggests Engel. "If you see kids solving conflicts on their own, building forts without the aid of an adult, climbing without being pulled down or helped up by an adult, you're in the right place."

- * Ask about student outcomes and where they end up after leaving the school. Both Engel and Calabrese report that their students go on to be confident, creative and emotionally steady students in a wide range of learning environments, from public and private schools, to Montessori and Waldorf schools, to homeschooling.

Sandi Schwartz is a freelance journalist and mother of two. She has written extensively about parenting, wellness and environmental issues. She is the author of two books, "Finding Ecohappiness: Fun Nature Activities to Help Your Kids Feel Happier and Calmer" and "Sky's Search for Ecohappiness." Learn more at ecohappinessproject.com.

SOME FOREST SCHOOLS IN THE BAY AREA

- * **Berkeley Forest School.** Berkeley.

berkeleyforestschool.org

- * **Forest Bloom School.** San Francisco.

forestbloomschool.com

- * **Little Earthlings Forest School.** San Francisco.

littleearthlingsforestschool.com

- * **Little Forest Explorers.** San Francisco.

littleforestexplorers.com

- * **Magic Forest School.** East Bay.

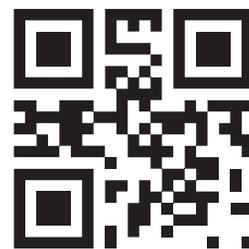
magicforestschool.com

- * **Wise Forest Preschool.** San Francisco.

wiseforestpreschool.com



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