

Flourishing in Nature

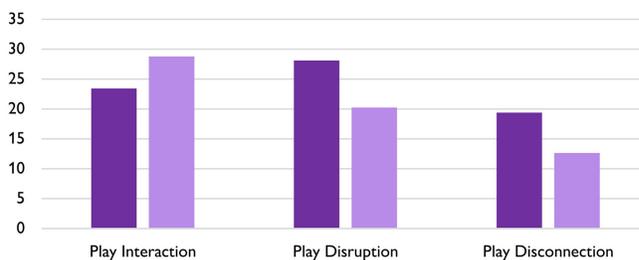
Investigating the Impact of Nature Preschools on Young Children's Peer Play Interactions

Overview. Peer play interactions are a component of social-emotional learning. For young children, competence in social-emotional learning has been shown to prepare them for cognitively demanding tasks and predict academic success. Peer play behaviors often function as an indicator of social competence and are a critical aspect of children's school readiness. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of nature preschools on young children's play interactions. Four nature preschools (84 participants) and two non-nature preschools (24 participants) took part in this study in the 2018-2019 school year. Peer play was measured by the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale, which assesses three dimensions of peer play (play interactions, play disruption, and play disconnection) in both the school and home settings.

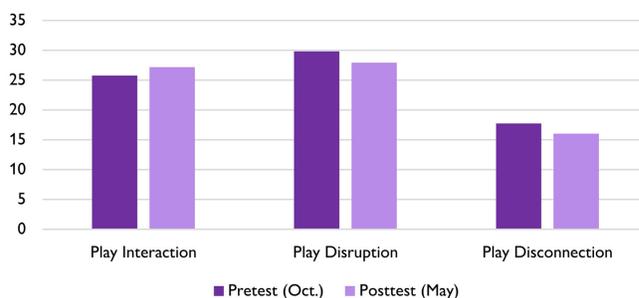


Image Credit: Wind Ridge Schoolhouse, MN

Changes in Nature Preschoolers' Peer Play Interactions at **School**



Changes in Nature Preschoolers' Peer Play Interactions at **Home**



Results: Results suggest significant growth in play interactions ($p < .001$) and significant reductions ($p < .001$) in play disruption and play disconnection behaviors for both school and home/out of school settings. The only significant change in the non-nature participants was in play disconnection behaviors at home ($p = .04$).

Conclusion. Based on the characteristics of nature preschools, where children routinely engage in open-ended, creative, social play in nature for extended periods of time, it is not surprising that children develop desirable play interactions. These findings suggest play in nature may be more conducive to supporting desirable peer play behaviors than play in non-nature settings. While further research is needed, this study supports the contribution of nature preschools to social and academic success in kindergarten and beyond, as well as toward supporting the positive peer play behaviors salient to childhood.

