

# 2014 Nature-Based Preschool National Conference

## Session Descriptions

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### **Preschool in the Woods: Snow, No Potty, and Fire!**

Sean Shaffer & Teresa Weed, North Park Village Nature Center

Discover the simple yet effective components of outdoor, unstructured nature play utilized at “Walking Stick Woods,” a 12-acre parcel within North Park Village Nature Center (Chicago). Here, children are given simple tools such as rope and burlap. Assistance is provided only when requested, or when frustration threatens to thwart play.

### **Nature as a Catalyst for Emerging Curriculum**

Marty Watson, Dodge Nature Center

This session will share examples of actual indoor and outdoor classroom activities that emerge from experiences in nature. It shows the delicate balance of teacher and child in the co-creation of curriculum. Examples and techniques will be illustrated that promote sustained project work leading to in-depth knowledge related to nature and the environment.

### **Demonstrating Children’s Learning – How to create student portfolios that support assessment, reflect curriculum, and are fun and meaningful for children and families**

Schlitz Audubon Nature Center

Student Portfolios are not a new idea. In recent years at Schlitz Audubon Preschool, we have expanded our approach to nature journals, using them as assessment tools for teachers, as self-reflective journals for children, and as documents that reflect the growth and experiences of the child for parents to treasure long after preschool is over. In this session we will talk about the gradual evolution of our studio portfolios, as well as the variety of approaches different teachers have in creating portfolios with their students and how we share this information during the course of a school year.



Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm

### **Integrating High Quality Early Childhood Methods without Compromising the Nature-Based Approach**

Rachel Larimore & Steve Frisbee, Chippewa Nature Center

This session will focus on ways to integrate high quality early childhood approaches into a nature-based curriculum. Research-based curriculum, program and child assessment, behavior management

philosophies, techniques for teaching handwriting, etc., can all be used in a nature-based program. We'll discuss how that's possible using Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool as an example.

### **Parent Communication and Involvement**

Megan Gessler, Kendall County Forest Preserve District

Find out how to communicate the benefits of a nature-based program, keep open parent communication throughout the school year, engage parents in active participation, formulate a nature-based observation and assessment system, and allow for honest surveys to help shape your program.

### **Hands On! Creative Activities for the Nature Classroom**

Nature's Way Preschool Staff

Nature's Way Preschool staff share their top ten ideas for all areas of a nature preschool. Our list includes trail activities, sensory table ideas, small group lessons, food experiences, outdoor games, and more. You will leave with 100 great ideas for a nature-based learning program!

### **Spreading the Word on the Nature-Based Approach to the Early Childhood World**

Rachel Larimore, Chippewa Nature Center

The world of nature-based preschools is growing, but the speed of growth partly depends on our efforts to "spread the word" to the traditional preschool and early childhood world. This session will share ideas for working with early childhood folks in your community to increase the amount of nature that is in ALL preschool programs.



Nature's Way Preschool

### **Fan into Flame with the Story Box Lady**

Laura Crump, Cross Creek Charter Academy

Join the Story Box Lady, Laura Crump, where her goal is to fuel reading comprehension through retelling stories about science and literature. Laura has developed a system using good stories and simple props to help kids increase their reading comprehension. She will demonstrate how a story box promotes enthusiasm for reading. She will have several examples of story boxes she has created and ideas on how to develop story boxes of your own.

## **Engaging Parents and the Community through Special Programs**

Linda Rose, Out & About Preschool

Discover how we engage our parents in special evening preschool programs such as “The Night Sky,” “Camping Out,” and more. Our special Grand-Buddies program has grown over the past five years to create some amazing outdoor and inter-generational friendships.

## **Long Sticks, Short Sticks, Smooth Sticks, Bumpy Sticks**

Sueann Ahrens, Pioneer’s Park Nature Center

Explore the wonderful world of sticks. You will leave this session with hands-on activities to do with your class, and sticks, while exploring in the natural world.

## **Outdoor Nature Play Spaces**

Sheila Williams Ridge, University of Minnesota Lab School

An open forum to discuss the creation and evolution of outdoor play spaces for young children. Participants will be encouraged to share photos and other information about their playgrounds in this participatory session. Participants will also help us discuss goals for meeting the developmental needs of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and older children in natural outdoor play spaces.

## **Hikes, Hikes, and More Hikes**

Jessica Dankert & Steve Frisbee, Chippewa Nature Center

Hikes, or excursions outside the play area, are a critical part of the nature-based preschool day. We’ll present some of our favorite hikes ideas (for all seasons) from Chippewa Nature Center’s Nature Preschool. We hope you’ll come with your favorite ideas to share with the group.

## **Using Public Policy to Advance the Nature Preschool Movement**

Christy Merrick, North American Association for Environmental Education’s Natural Start Alliance

Join an interactive discussion led by the Natural Start Alliance about how the nature preschool community can help advance public policy that supports early childhood environmental education. We’ll probe questions such as: How do education, health, and safety policies act as a barrier to our work? What policies could advance our work? Are there success stories of policies that have helped advance environmental learning in early childhood? What sorts of tools would help us work together to advance policies that strengthen our field?



Nature’s Way Preschool

### **Panel: Diverse Approaches to Nature Preschools and their Near Kin**

Several nature centers have crafted long-term approaches to early childhood environmental education that vary from the common model of a nature center running its own preschool. This panel will share several options in current use, and invite questions and open discussion from the audience. Panel members will be:

- Marcie Oltman, Tamarack Nature Center, Minnesota: Pros and cons of operating a nature-based preschool in partnership with a public school district.
- Charity Krueger, Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm, Ohio: Using the nature center and farm as a host site for daily Head Start classes.
- Rachel Larimore, Chippewa Nature Center, Michigan: Extending the nature preschool model into a kindergarten partnership with the local public schools.

### **TRENDS IN THE PROFESSION, Nature Preschools: Where do we go from here?**

Marcie Oltman, Tamarack Nature Center; Patti Bailie, Antioch University New England; Rachel Larimore, Chippewa Nature Center

To keep the momentum going, join us for a conference wrap-up on the future of nature preschools and what is needed to ensure continued success. Panelists will glean major trends and questions from conference presentations, discussions and conversations to facilitate a conversation on where we go, how we get there and what we use as a guide. Trends from early childhood education, research, environmental/nature education and child care, will be teased out and brought together, giving us a broad sense of what is needed for the future.

