



Julie Barlow and her son, Dexter Heath, 4, walk along Charlie's Trail at Royal Roads University near Victoria. CHAD HIPOLITO/FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

EDUCATION

# Kindergarten takes to the woods

Five-year-olds at Victoria school to spend half of their day outside in program inspired by Germany's long-established Waldkindergärten, or forest preschools

SHANNON MONEO VICTORIA

Come September of next year, 22 kindergarteners will abandon their classroom each morning, rain or shine, for a hike into the woods where for the next 2 1/2 hours sticks and stones will replace pencil and paper.

The students, from Sangster Elementary School in the Victoria suburb of Colwood, may well be the first kindergarten class in

Canada to spend half of their school day outside in what's being called nature kindergarten.

It's an idea that's spread from Europe to North America, but so far, a concept that's catered to preschoolers who don't follow a set curriculum. But B.C.'s move last year to full-day kindergarten has eased the way for such a pilot project.

Once outside, the five-year-olds will walk on logs, identify plants,

visit the lagoon for animal spotting and enjoy story time and songs. Later, the Sangster students will return to their portable classroom for lunch and spend the next couple hours inside.

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Enid Elliot

BC NEWS.  
BC VIEWS.

A screenshot of a news website interface. At the top, it says "British Columbia - The Globe and Mail". Below that is a search bar and navigation links for "Home", "News", "Commentary", "Business", "Investing", "Sports", "Life", and "Arts". There are also links for "Toronto", "British Columbia", "Prairies", "Ontario", "Quebec", and "Atlantic". At the bottom, it says "INTERNATIONAL EDITION" and "BRITISH COLUMBIA".

It isn't just debris," he said. "It's a memento for Japanese families and their loved ones. It needs to be treated with great respect."

prediction based on estimates of wind pull and ocean motion caused by the swift Kuroshio Current off Japan. Mr. Ebbesmeyer,

miles, eight months," Mr. Ebbesmeyer said of the tsunami debris. "Eight months from March is

spits back.  
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## Kindergarten: Pilot project has an \$80,000 budget for two years

Ms. Elliot is an early childhood researcher who teaches at the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care as well as at Camosun College's Faculty of Education.

"Children aren't getting outdoor experience. Instead, two year olds know how to work an iPad."

Ms. Elliot, with more than 30 years of early childhood education experience in both the U.S. and B.C., has been part of a group working with Frances Krusekopf, the principal of curriculum and programs for the Sooke School District, who planted the nature kindergarten seed in January.

Last year, Ms. Krusekopf's young son attended one of Germany's long-established Waldkindergärten - a forest preschool - while the family was in Munich for three months.

Niko, now 6, loved the 30-minute walk to the forest and the time spent playing with sticks, naming trees and lollygagging along the river, all the while learning science, math, literacy and respect for the environment.

"It was amazing to watch children be in any kind of weather and be completely content," Ms.

Krusekopf said. The children were also physically fit, independent and patient, since waiting for slower classmates was routine.

It was a bit of a change from Canada, where childhood obesity is on the rise and hovering parents are too scared to let their children be on their own despite little evidence that it's a more threatening world, Ms. Elliot said.

Eager to see if Waldkindergärten could be transplanted to B.C., Ms. Krusekopf began planning for the nature kindergarten in February.

A coup was having Royal Roads University allow the class onto its property, where a forest, lagoon, beach and stream are all in walking distance from Sangster Elementary. The pilot project has an \$80,000 budget for two years, the full amount going to pay the early childhood educator \$40,000 per year. The educator is needed to ensure the 22 children stay safe.

Existing funding covers the teacher. With the only weather that would chop forest forays being extreme cold or wind, \$3,900 annually (\$177 per student) has been budgeted for rain jackets, overall pants, hiking boots and backpacks.

Funding for outdoor clothing will come via grants that will also fund honorariums for native elders who will teach the children traditional native ways.

Michelle Hegge knows about proper clothing. She's the teaching director at Chelsea Co-operative Nursery School in Chelsea, Que., and now into her second year of the school's Outdoor Ed Program where three- to five-year-olds venture out each Friday.

"My biggest problem? Parents that don't have appropriate clothing for their children. When I say wool socks, I mean wool socks," she said.

Ms. Hegge, who has a biology degree and also works as a park naturalist in nearby Gatineau Park, credits outdoor learning guru, Richard Louv and his oft-cited book *Last Child in the Woods*, as her inspiration for getting children out of the inside.

Fixing, what Mr. Louv termed "nature deficit disorder," has been revelatory.

Ms. Hegge recalled one child who was terrified of trees, who despite living near the forest, had not been in the forest. Another child didn't want to leave the

classroom because there were no toys outside.

"We take it for granted that kids would know how to play outside," Ms. Hegge said.

They don't. "Children at younger and younger ages are put in front of screens."

But once her charges got in touch with their squelched imaginations, they learned to make lean-tos, discovered that a stick could be anything, revelled in puddle-splashing, played games wearing snowshoes and managed the fine art of peeing outside.

Another benefit of shifting learning to the outside is that kids who have trouble sitting still manage fine.

"In the outdoors, everyone is happy and gets along. The so-called difficult children are better," Ms. Hegge noted.

Aware that not every child may be suitable for the program, as well as B.C.'s commitment to inclusive instruction, Ms. Krusekopf said it hasn't been determined how Sangster's first class will be chosen. "That's part of the troubleshooting," she said.

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licence to operate by having an alternate source of water."

However, critics remain suspicious, saying that the Debolt water project is so new and untested, it is impossible to know what the long-term impact may be.

"That has the potential to partially address concerns around water usage, but the government is still pushing a massive ramp-up of fracking without us knowing the cumulative impacts on water or health," said George Heyman of the Sierra Club of B.C. "Let's take a pause and not assume what we have can be expanded ad infinitum."

As the independent MLA for Cariboo North, Bob Simpson has been pushing for a review of fracking. He said the 100,000 barrels of Debolt water extracted every day is just a drop in the bucket.

"What I don't like about this is the suggestion that they are somehow resolving the freshwater situation. You are talking about a minuscule amount of what the industry is using," he said.

Once it has been used in fracking, the Debolt water is injected back into the ground, into containers made of steel and concrete. But Mr. Simpson said he is still uneasy.

"We don't know the hydrological and geological implications of drawing the saline aquifer down. We may be creating a different kind of problem."