



take it outside

EVERYTHING THEY NEED TO KNOW
THESE SOOKE KIDS ARE LEARNING
IN AN OUTDOOR KINDERGARTEN

BY SHANNON MONEO PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEAN AZIM

In September 2012, 22 five-year-olds will spend half their kindergarten class outdoors.

IT WAS an exceptional call. Late last year a parent in Vancouver called Frances Krusekopf, principal of curriculum and programs for the Sooke School District, to tell Krusekopf her family would move to Colwood if her son was accepted into a new program being piloted by the Sooke School District.

Debuting in September at Sangster Elementary School, the program will be known as Nature Kindergarten. Each weekday morning a teacher, an early childhood educator and 22 five-year-olds will romp around Royal Roads University's lagoon, forest and streams in all but severe weather, learning as they go. The students will return to their portable classroom for lunch and their afternoon session.

In fact, the demand was so high for the coveted spots in the program that this past February, when temperatures were below zero, more than a dozen parents camped out overnight on the steps of the Sooke School District Office prior to the registration day. Parents began staking out their spot in line more than 18 hours before the office opened.

Nature Kindergarten is part of an emerging movement whose adherents believe that being regularly exposed to nature, at any age, tends to make people more physically and emotionally healthy. And the best way to maximize the impact of time spent in nature is to start young, with adults helping small children to look in awe at a bug or leaf, or letting them muck a stick in a pond or tidal pool, their cheeks pink from fresh air.

"There's a great deal of interest in a program that offers an outdoor alternative especially from families that value the outdoor learning philosophy," says Krusekopf, who characterizes interest in the program as voracious. She's had calls from as far as Newfoundland about it.

Krusekopf twigged to the concept during a three-month trip to Munich in 2010, while her son Niko was attending one of Germany's long-established *Waldkindergärten* or forest pre-schools. Each day the curious and impressionable children walked along the river, identifying plants and animals, noticing subtle changes in their environment and becoming fit and independent. "It was amazing to watch children be in any kind of weather and be completely content," Krusekopf recalls.

When Germans discovered that Krusekopf was from Canada, they were flabbergasted that such a program didn't exist in a country known for its natural abundance.

It wasn't difficult for Krusekopf to get the green light for her green project from Sooke School District superintendent Jim Cambridge after she planted the Nature Kindergarten

seed in January 2011. But Cambridge came at it from another angle, having read and been influenced by Richard Louv's ground-breaking 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*,

which introduced the oft-quoted and now trademarked term "nature-deficit disorder." In the book, Louv writes that children need to be exposed to nature to be physically and emotionally healthy.

Cambridge, a former school principal, was fearful that today's over-protected, over-digitized children, more accustomed to indoor pursuits, wouldn't have the coping and decision-making skills necessary to thrive as adults. "There's a huge benefit to technology but it needs to be balanced with non-screen time, getting dirty, playing in the mud. If children are told to never stand on a log, they don't take the risks," Cambridge says. Nature Kindergarten will allow children to make decisions and learn from them, he said.

To help build the program, Krusekopf assembled a team from the University of Victoria, UBC, Royal Roads University, Royal BC Museum and even CRD Parks, which is providing training on how to manage outdoor risks.

One risk-related challenge the team has faced is adults' misconception that danger, be it a bear, cougar, falling tree, big wave, kidnapper or killer lurks at every corner. But research has shown that it's a safer world today than a generation ago, Krusekopf says.

The man who alerted Cambridge agrees. "In the US, violent crime against children has been going down for the last 20 years. What's been going up is the 24-hour news coverage. We're being conditioned to be afraid," Louv says in an interview from his San Diego home.

Then there's our addiction to technology. "The more high-tech our lives become, the more nature we need," Louv stresses. Not immune to the lure of gadgets, Louv admits he has to pull himself away from screens and make himself go for a hike.

So, adults too are nature-starved thanks to constant screen diets, a point driven home during a speaking engagement in Seattle, when a woman accosted Louv and told him big kids suffer from nature-deficit disorder.

Louv realized that unless adults are full players, the move to get children outside won't reach its full potential. His second book, *The Nature Principle*, urges adults to tap into the restorative powers of nature. "We need nature. We don't do so well when we don't have it," he says.

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Yet, when it comes to defining "nature" even scientists have a difficult time, Louv notes. His definition? Anytime he's in a meaningful relationship with a species not his own. A sterile soccer field or golf course doesn't qualify, but the space along the edges might. In a nod to changing, environmentally conscious interests, Louv says baby boomers don't want golf courses in their retirement communities. "They want nature trails," he says.

He cites a study of one group of people who exercised on a treadmill in a gym and a second group that did "green exercising" (hiking, calisthenics) outside. Both groups burned the same number of calories but the outside cohort displayed better blood pressure and other health indicators than the inside automatons.

Cambridge knows well the fun that comes with being outside. A triathlete, he says there's nothing he and fellow runners like better than splashing through puddles during a trail run. "I wear a suit all the time. It's kind of fun to get muddy even if I'm 56," he says.

One Canadian organization that builds on Louv's work is the Victoria-based Child and Nature Alliance, where Louv is an honorary chairman. Launched in March 2009, the alliance's goal is to build strategies and affiliations that reconnect Canadian children and youth to nature.

Throughout Canada, there wasn't a unified voice, says the alliance's executive director Becs Hoskins. The alliance has partnered with several organizations such as Participaction, the

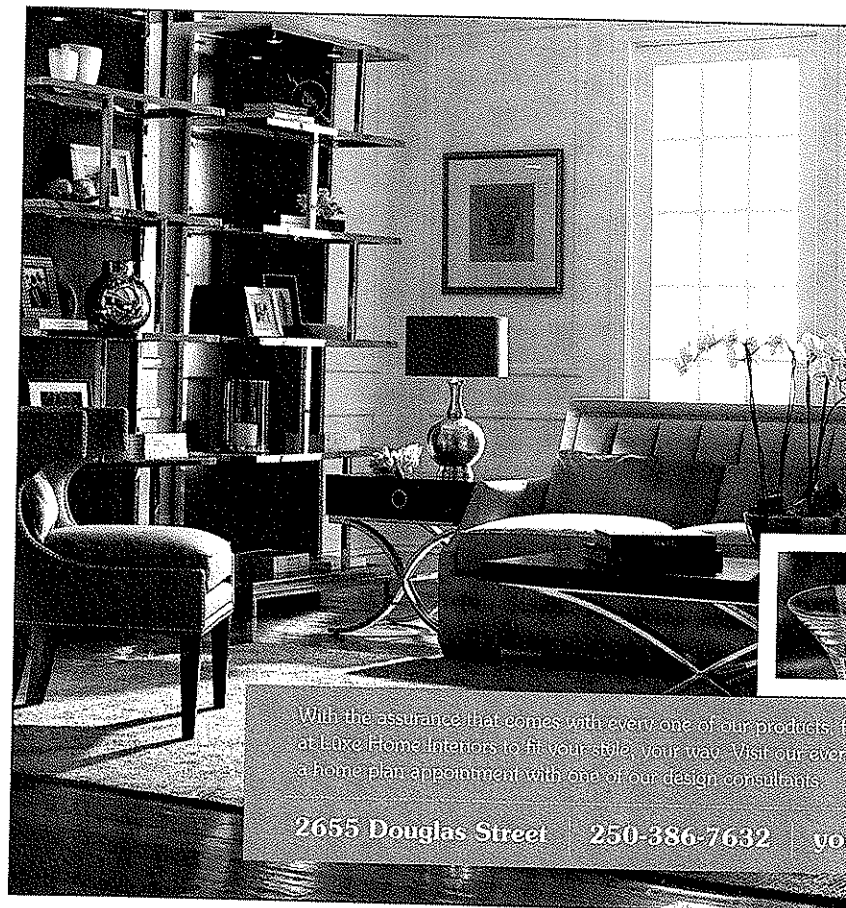
Canadian Parks Council and the U.S.-based Children and Nature Network, of which Louv is a founder.

While those organizations already have an entrenched concept that nature and getting outside are important, the alliance also reaches out to sectors, such as land-use planning and health, that aren't fully recognizing the full benefits of nature, Hoskins says.

"It's not just nice to go outside. It's a core component to health. For us, it's a deliberate need to make sure the conversation is happening," she adds.

The conversation in the Sooke School District continues as planning for Nature Kindergarten progresses. The two-year pilot project has an \$80,000 budget to pay the early childhood educator \$40,000 each year. The teacher's salary and benefits will be covered with existing funding. Another \$3,900 annually has been budgeted to pay for rain jackets, overall pants, hiking boots and backpacks for each of the 22 students (\$177 each), who will be outside in all weather. Funding for outdoor clothing will come via grants, which will also fund honorariums for native elders who will teach the children traditional native ways.

While it's a pilot project, Cambridge says it's hoped the Ministry of Education will acknowledge Nature Kindergarten's benefits and fund it provincially in every BC school district. Healthier students become healthy adults who cost the health-care system less and who know how to protect the environment, Cambridge says. ▀



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