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## Stewards for the Environment: The Benefits of Early Childhood Outdoor Education

Meaghan Lightfoot  
*University of Dayton*

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# Stewards for the Environment: The Benefits of Early Childhood Education

Meaghan Lightfoot, 2020 Cohort

As a child, no one was able to ever persuade me to come inside. Every day after school, you could always find me in the wooded area behind my house, running in between and climbing on the trees, building piles of leaves during the fall, exploring creeks, and looking for rocks. I've always felt a close connection to nature; I was raised with a high regard for the outdoors and most of the fond memories of my childhood involve those woods behind my house. So, when my Child Development teacher showed a video discussing outdoor education for children, I was intrigued. When the video presentation ended, however, I could hear the scoffs and judgmental remarks of my classmates. "That's so dangerous." "I would never send my child to a school like that! So irresponsible!" The news report video was entitled *Kids Gone Wild: Denmark's Forest Kindergartens*, in which children were running around in the woods and climbing on trees in 5-degree weather. All this was taking place at a Forest Kindergarten in Denmark, under the supervision of a teacher who encouraged the kids to roam freely in the natural environment. When asked for our opinions on outdoor education, I was the only student in the class of 30 who agreed with Denmark's methods of outdoor learning. As a River Steward, I feel a close and personal connection to nature and the outdoors, and was able to view this video differently than my classmates. It is my belief that fostering outdoor experiences is so incredibly vital and important in the dexterity of child development, especially in a society where technology is distracting us from the natural world.



According to the video, 10% of Denmark's preschools are forest schools, with the classroom being outdoors despite the weather or time of year. The number of Forest schools

has doubled in Denmark in the last 20 years, and numbers continue to increase with their rising popularity. The video also addresses the issue of integrating those children who attended forest schools into the classroom environment when outdoor education is no longer offered for their age group. Research is showing that compared to 3 to 5 year-old children educated in classrooms, kids who attended forest preschools and kindergartens are less stressed, can concentrate more, and show better motor development skills. In his article *Leave No Child Inside*, Richard Louv points out the risks of raising children under the protection of our homes, with no outside experiences or contact, stating this causes “threats to their independent judgement and value of place, to their ability to feel awe and wonder, to their sense of stewardship for the Earth, and most immediately, threats their psychological and physical health.” He then goes on to mention that studies show that “schools that use outdoor classrooms and other forms of experiential education produce significant student gains in social studies, science, language arts, and math.”

As a future environmental educator, I see the importance of getting children engaged in the natural environment at a young age, fostering a love for the environment that will hopefully stay with them throughout the course of their lives. The outdoors is a place I am passionate about, and that’s why I’m choosing to complete my service requirement at Learning Tree Farm here in Dayton, Ohio. The farm’s mission is to facilitate learning in a traditional farm setting, allowing people to take the time to explore the outdoor area and see the interwoven connection between humans and nature first hand. Their nature preschool encourages children to develop and implement their curious minds into discovering their surrounding environment. Volunteering at the nature preschool, I’ve witnessed the excitement these kids have coming back to the farm each day, feeding and caring for the animals, and exploring the local flowers and plants. They learn how to be stewards for the environment and gain the appropriate developmental skills all through outdoor, hands on learning experiences.





The benefits of outdoor education are endless, and the lack of outdoor educational facilities in the U.S. compared to European countries could explain issues surrounding U.S. society and the way in which we treat our environment. Access to nature is continually disappearing through deforestation, construction, pollution, and human expansion. This, along with the value our society places in technology, hinders children from forming a connection with nature. As Lauv puts it, children of our generation lack “places of initiation” or places/experiences in their life that give them a sense of awe and wonderment of our surrounding world. My first place of initiation was my backyard, and thinking about how many children do not experience that feeling of excitement pertaining to the outdoors is upsetting. I believe the next generation would benefit immensely from the implementation of more forest preschools and kindergartens such as Learning Tree Farm. Such schools would foster a love for nature vital to child development and potentially put an end to the mentality that children playing outdoors is “dangerous” or “irresponsible”.