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Think outside the box

Educators seek to get Vermont kids outdoors and away from the TV

Author(s): Cory Stephenson **Date:** September 15, 2013 **Section:** ENVIRONMENT

Groups of early childhood educators have been gathering around the state this year to learn how they can help young children spend more time playing outside. These sessions are facilitated by the Four Winds Nature Institute and Shelburne Farms, in collaboration with other nonprofit groups.

Despite a robust body of research documenting the many physical and psychological benefits of interacting with the natural world, children now spend less unstructured time outside than any previous generation.

A typical preschooler's day is filled with an average of four hours of television time. Preliterate children can distinguish many different corporate logos and products but are not able to identify the plants or animals native to their region.

Getting children outside isn't as simple as it might seem. For starters, there's the issue of finding safe outdoor spaces where children have the freedom to make choices and solve problems. Children learn by doing. This is how they find out that sometimes you get wet catching frogs in a pond, and sometimes you get scratched climbing trees.

Then there are the cultural and state-level barriers that make it difficult to take children out to play. Families and their extended communities often don't value outdoor play and need to learn about the benefits of unstructured time in nature.

Moreover, the trend away from time outside has been going on for so long that many adults don't know how to provide this aspect of healthy development for young children. Early childhood professionals are uniquely positioned to help turn the current tide of our indoor culture — but they need help doing so.

One educator summed it up in a recent survey: "I need support in providing a rationale to administration and parents, and help finding outdoor activities for the youngest learners."

How can early childhood professionals get this kind of support? Recognizing the importance of this question, staff from the Four Winds Nature Institute and Shelburne Farms worked together last winter to develop a statewide strategy.

This process resulted in a series of forums on outdoor play in Burlington, Montpelier and Bennington in partnership with the North Branch Nature Center and Bennington Early Childhood

Center. More than 70 people came together to find more ways of helping young children play and learn outside.

The result is a growing network of early childhood educators who are committed to helping children spend more time outside — and finding ways to make that happen.

In a recent survey, more than 80 percent of the respondents involved in these forums said that they wanted to nurture this burgeoning network. To keep early childhood professionals connected at statewide levels, a Facebook page “VT Kids Play and Learn Outdoors” was created that has quickly become a valuable place to find resources, share ideas and support each others’ efforts in allowing children time to play and learn in natural settings.

The collaborative aspect of this work is critical. The growing network has also spawned a professional learning community, which is meeting for seven sessions to explore different aspects of outdoor play. The group is being facilitated by staff of the Four Winds Nature Institute, Shelburne Farms and the North Branch Nature Center.

This type of ongoing community of learning, which is growing nationally as a best practice for professional development, can be a very effective way to share knowledge while supporting each other’s professional growth. Early childhood professionals in central Vermont seem to agree, as enrollment for this outdoor play series filled up almost immediately.

The group of 20 early childhood professionals and parents had an inspirational start to the first session in August. Gathering at the North Branch Nature Center, they shared their stories, concerns and information while enjoying the magical evening light.

“I thought it was a good group of folks who had a lot to share; the participants were really thoughtful, engaged and enthusiastic,” said Jen Brown, one of the facilitators.

Elizabeth Cooper of Ecoplanning and Design and Susie Gray of Growing Health by Design were both on hand to share their expertise on the evening’s topic, physical spaces.

“It was fun to be there,” said Cooper. “People asked a lot of questions and voiced concerns about things such as risk and liability. I was able to give them good information and support. You don’t have to do anything big — start small and simple and go from there.”

After two hours together, each participant left with a plan to make one concrete change to their own outdoor spaces, such as planting a few stepping stones, making a musical play area under their slide structure or simply starting the afternoon with a nature moment and charting it to notice seasonal change.

Participants are spending the month before their next meeting observing what effect their changes have on the outdoor play of the children they work with.

“I was so impressed that on a beautiful summer night, so many early childhood educators gave up their evening to join their peers to explore outdoor play and the learning that it fosters,” said

facilitator Linda Wellings. “Their commitment and excitement about outdoor play were contagious, and I can’t wait until we meet again.”

Upcoming topics for this group include the role of adults in children’s outdoor play and measuring the learning that happens.

Given the enthusiastic response to this professional learning community, Four Winds and partners are exploring ways to support childcare providers and early childhood educators in other areas of Vermont.

As Gov. Peter Shumlin stated in his second inaugural address, “The evidence is overwhelming: the earlier we invest in our children, the healthier, more productive lives they will have.”

Cory Stephenson coordinates the Knee High Nature program for the nonprofit Four Winds Nature Institute in Chittenden.

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