



This is the first of two articles in our Outdoor Education special feature. In *Canadian Wildlife* magazine's November/December 2022 issue, we look at Learning from the Land, an Indigenous perspective on Outdoor Education for the 21st century

THE NATURE OF LEARNING

Outdoor education is needed more than ever. Amid years of ongoing pandemic, ever-increasing “screen time” and growing alienation from nature, children in Canada—our future environmental stewards—need to get out and get their hands dirty

By Niki Wilson Illustration Alysha Dawn

WHEN MONICA NISSEN TAKES ELEMENTARY school students outside, she asks them to interview the trees. “Find out how the tree’s winter went, and what it dreams of for the future,” she says. The kids rarely question the assignment. Instead, they come back from their interviews itching to tell her all about it, their senses and imaginations ignited. “We discuss what the tree can teach us,” says Nissen. “How can we learn from a being that is grounded in place, that has potentially been here for hundreds of years and that has this incredible underground network that we are only beginning to understand?”

It’s a great example of learning with and from place, says Nissen, highlighting a central philosophy of the non-profit Wildsight, where she is the education director. Wildsight works with teachers to provide environmental learning outside for kids in B.C.’s southern Rocky Mountains and Columbia region. It’s one of many organizations that deliver some form of organized outdoor learning across the country.

Canada has a rich tradition of these kinds of programs, though the philosophies and goals vary between organizations. Common

goals among them include personal growth and building community, integrated with place consciousness and goals to address environmental crises like climate change. The way organizations meet these aims is evolving with an awareness of issues such as the effects of urbanization. Urban children often have less access to nature and may therefore be less likely to become environmental stewards and more likely to suffer the mental and physical health issues associated with less access to the outdoors. Immigration rates are also slowly rising, and the face of the nation will continue to change at a time when diversity and inclusion are already challenges for outdoor educators.

There are many hurdles to getting kids outside, but the benefits are worth fighting for. Like many outdoor ed organizations, Wildsight is returning to programming as pandemic restrictions loosen. The timing has never been more critical for young people, whose mental health has suffered through pandemic-related lockdowns. If some good can come of the pandemic, it may be in realizing the importance of spending time outdoors for our kids’ and our environment’s well-being.

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NATURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, CANADIAN youth already had a high incidence of mental health issues. A 2019 study in Ontario revealed that one in five youth ages 4 to 17 years suffer from a mental health disorder, a rate that has not decreased for 30 years. That same year, Canada’s youth suicide rate was determined to be the third highest in OECD countries. And the pandemic didn’t help. Youth have been particularly vulnerable to the social and structural disruptions brought about by the pandemic and, as a group, are more likely to report increases in stress and anxiety since the onset of the crisis. In 2020, there was an increase in the number of hospitalizations due to mental health disorders in youth ages 5 to 24 and a dramatic increase in the number of eating disorders reported. The number of calls, texts and online clicks for help from the Kids Help Phone doubled in 2020 from the previous year.

pressure, boost creativity, increase energy, lead to better sleep and improve mood. Kids who spend time outside are more likely to have healthier body weights, and a 20-minute walk in a park can improve concentration scores in kids with ADHD similar to prescription stimulant medication. Teachers have observed that outdoor learning can improve kids’ attention spans and decrease disruptive behaviour. Though getting outside is no cure-all for youth mental health problems, there can be little denying that time outside is critical for youth well-being.

Time in nature promotes not only mental health directly but also the sense of well-being young people—especially teens—derive from healthy social relationships. Benefits for youth can come in the way programs are structured and facilitated. Rather than hurling a bunch of students together on the first day of



BUILDING EARTH STEWARDS

WHEN HE WAS A BOY, MIKE BINGLEY’S parents let him wander and explore nature at his own pace. Once, while visiting his grandparents’ farm in Upper Cape, N.B., they lost him. “I was out in the blueberry patch having my fill,” he says, adding, “I still love blueberries.” Research tells us these early experiences in nature are vital in establishing a lifelong connection to it, and Bingley, now director of education at the Canadian Wildlife Federation and responsible for the organization’s extensive national programs and resources, was fortunate to have parents that cared for and had access to the outdoors. “My mum and I planted a native plant garden, and I paid attention to it,” he says. Other transformative moments include when “a developer cut down the forest behind my house,” he says, and living in Newfoundland when the cod moratorium came into effect.

At a young age, Bingley was exposed to events that were part of a nationwide conversation about the environment and the role of humans in conserving it. As awareness of these environmental issues has increased over time, many outdoor education organizations, including CWF, have chosen to focus on environmental education.

“Our goal is environmental literacy,” he says. “We want people to understand how the environment works, what their place in it is and what they can do to protect it.” CWF programs build on the value of time spent doing activities outdoors with added ecological learning. For example, beyond learning a skill such as kayaking through rapids, Bingley says, “we’re also going to have a conversation about what species are living in the rapids. Are there times we may not want to do this because of salmon spawning, for instance? Or because bears are feeding at the rapids?”

Wildsight takes a similar approach. “We gravitate a lot toward place-based learning, which is a concept that is really prevalent in the B.C. curriculum,” Nissen explains. It’s about having students immersed in the field and learning from their immediate environment. In sharing what they learned from their “interview” with trees, for example, the students often chat about the “wood wide web,” a term popularized by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard referring to the incredible mycelium networks that are a fungi super-highway of connectivity between trees. The kids learn that “it’s not all about competition in nature,” Nissen says. They learn the trees are communicating, sharing and cooperating. “It’s more about building empathy among living beings.”

Both Nissen and Bingley say their organizations promote year-round opportunities for environmental learning outdoors, where possible. They want to move away from the once-a-year field-trip model to one where frequent learning in and from nature is normalized. It’s shifting

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the narrative to “thinking of nature as something we are a part of, as opposed as something we need to see,” says Bingley.

Wildsight is helping teachers integrate programs throughout the year through the Kootenay Boundary Environmental Education Initiative, a collaboration with several other organizations and six school districts in the Columbia Basin. Through the outdoor learning challenge, hundreds of teachers have committed to going outside weekly with their students. There is also a shift to leaving textbooks behind and learning the curriculum from nature. “Students can do real and applied math in the garden or learn the circumference of a [real] tree,” Nissen says.

It’s not about replacing classroom learning altogether but rather about building a sustained connection to the natural world. “Nature connection is more like a relay race,” says Bingley, as opposed to a single moment that creates a wonderful memory.



Clearly, the kids are not all right. Participating in some form of outdoor education might help. “A big part of it is simply getting outside,” says Andrew Young, executive director of Outward Bound Canada. “There’s all kinds of research on how nature has a positive impact on physical and mental health.” Just 20 to 30 minutes in a natural setting—including urban parks—has been shown to decrease stress in the body, and 120 minutes in nature a week is associated with health and well-being. It’s why Parks Canada is working with physicians to give prescriptions to get out in nature, pointing to evidence that in addition to decreasing stress, time in nature may improve immune function, lower blood

a long outdoor trip, Young says, “we do a ton of work up front to prepare kids for performing in a group, and making sure people feel welcome and included.” By the time boots hit the ground, “the kids feel like they are part of a community.” An independent review of the impact of Outward Bound programs in Canada suggests this kind of learning helps improve social connectedness among youth, improves their ability to collaborate, and increases compassion for one another. “If every kid in this country had outdoor education in their Grade 9 year, and we focused on using that as a tool to build community and getting kids used to being in nature, I think we would shift the school experience dramatically,” Young says.