

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

## OVERVIEW

The following information was compiled as part of a free online webinar, *Staying Connected: Nature Play and Learning* presented by the Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS.ORG). This is our way of lending support and encouragement to adults who are adjusting programs and routines in self-quarantined situations. We hope you find comfort and inspiration in the following ideas.

## WEBINAR DESCRIPTION

The coronavirus/COVID-19 has disrupted life as usual...but let's re-frame the hiatus as an opportunity for healthy nature connection with children! Despite the challenges that coronavirus presents, this information explores the many wonderful possibilities afforded by nature play and learning for parents, teachers, and of course - kids! We will consider how to stay connected as a community by interacting with nature and examine ways to use technology to bring us closer to nature and each other.

## ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

This content was developed by champions of nature-based education Ayana Verdi, founder of Verdi EcoSchool and homeschool mom in Melbourne, FL; Monica French, co-founder and director of Wild Haven Forest Preschool & Childcare in Baltimore, MD; and Monica Wiedel-Lubinski, founding director of ERAFANS and co-author of *Nature Play Workshop for Families* (Quarto Press: 2020) to discuss ways we can stay connected through nature play and learning.

## GOALS

- To offer ideas and approaches that help children and adults
  1. Make connections with the larger community
  2. Directly nurture connection with the land
  3. Promote self-awareness, mindfulness, and self-care
- To reassure adults that, despite the disruption in normal routines, they have the tools already to help children learn, play, and thrive at home

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## APPROACHES TO NATURE-BASED LEARNING

- Balance unstructured play with intentional learning opportunities – Remember: unstructured play is open-ended and has no specific learning objective, this is often the most meaningful mode in which a child learns!
- Follow the Rhythms of the Season – Take a cue from nature! What is happening outside right now? Notice these seasonal changes and integrate them into your curriculum! There is no need to buy materials when nature has so much to offer! Collect natural items from the outdoors to bring inside and have them enrich the learning and play indoors.
- Connect and learn from homeschool families – What curriculum to use? How to keep learning self-paced? Search out nature-based homeschool groups on social media! Don't know where to start? Try [wilderchild.com](http://wilderchild.com)
- Creating Core Routines – From *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, “The Core Routines of Nature Connection are things people do to learn nature's ways. They aren't lessons. They aren't knowledge. They are learning habits.”
- Core routines in nature-based learning are sensory awareness activities, games, gratitude, open-ended art experiences, practicing the art of questioning, visiting a sit spot, singing and storytelling.
- Flow Learning – An approach that allows you to structure nature awareness lessons for best effect. You can meet children where they are an interest and energy level, and then guide them step-by-step toward more meaningful and profound nature experiences.

The FLOW LEARNING sequence:

1. Stage One: Awaken Enthusiasm
2. Stage Two: Focus Attention
3. Stage Three: Offer Direct Experience
4. Stage Four: Share Inspiration

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## IDEAS FOR NATURE-BASED [HOME]SCHOOLING

Experience or Activity	Connecting with Community	Connecting with the Land and Natural Environment	Self-awareness, Reflection, and Self-care
Nature walks	<p>Leaving something behind for others to find</p> <p>Nature art projects that create beauty for the next visitors</p> <p>Simply walking your neighborhood or in a park in connecting with the community. Keep in mind, someone has walked this path before you.</p>	<p>Wildlife observations</p> <p>Plant/animal ID (Bioblitz your yard)</p> <p>Earthing/barefoot walking</p> <p>Invitations in nature: to notice the contrast of shadow and light; to notice the sounds around you, to notice the feeling of the earth under you body</p> <p>Finding and following tracks</p>	<p>Silent walk</p> <p>Meditation</p> <p>Group sharing – What was your favorite part of the walk? What sounds did you hear? How did you feel walking in the light vs. walking in the shadows?</p>
Gardening & Growing	<p>Start seeds for that can eventually be harvested and shared with others</p> <p>Community gardening/CSA</p> <p>Grow garden shelters like beanpole tipis or sunflower houses</p>	<p>Contact with the soil</p> <p>Learning the needs of plants and benefits to wildlife</p> <p>Compost experiments</p> <p>Digging, planting, tending</p>	<p>Grounding yourself in your green space</p> <p>Silent gardening moments</p> <p>Observation of pollinators in the garden; reflection through art and poetry</p>
Collections	<p>Sharing your collections with other via photographs</p> <p>Creating a collections bin where children can take a collection to their home</p>	<p>Rocks</p> <p>Leaves</p> <p>Foraged wild edibles and medicinals</p>	<p>What natural items call to you in nature? Do you prefer to collect one item over another?</p>

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Journaling	Online format with children in other countries or pen pals	Sketching in the field  Tracing materials, rubbings, etc.	Reflection journaling  Stories of the day
Live animals	Volunteering as a caretaker for animals at shelters or nature centers, farms, etc.  Color pictures to send to animals at the zoos, centers or shelters	Bird houses & animal feeders  Create nest helpers & bug shelters  Go on critter hunts	What animal do you identify with most?  Do you have a “spirit animal”?
Natural loose parts	Inventions – did you know many great inventions happened in time of quarantine?  Create a “loose parts library” Create a “loose parts library”, where people can take natural loose parts home with them	Nature museum  Explore textures of different natural objects  Connect to natural object through imaginary play	What speaks to you outdoors?  What are your favorite natural items to explore or play with?
Mapping	Map your neighborhood; your neighbors, local businesses  Head in a direction and map what you see! Ex: Mapping North	Map your space, develop a scavenger hunt  Follow a scented trail – use an essential oil and dab it on natural items on your walk, can you follow the smell?	Reflecting on favorite parts of your neighborhood/the space you mapped  Finding beauty and interest in the space you explore
Storytelling	Hearing stories from elders  Look up stories from the indigenous people from your area	Invitation to connect with a tree: go find a tree and “hear” its story, tell your tree a your story	Recorded meditations for bedtime

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	Share stories with one another through digital recordings and apps (seesaw app)		
Wild nature play	Connecting to a space that is in your community, for example: a local park	Climbing, rolling, spinning, jumping, slithering, digging, building	Reflecting/sharing your favorite discovery or part of nature play
Art experiences	Creating art for others enjoyment	Using natural materials as mediums: Leaf art, natural ink, painting rocks, etc.	What do you find beautiful? How does this art make you feel?

## HOW TEACHERS CAN STAY CONNECTED WITH CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Distance Learning – online videos, nature-based lesson plans, letters and postcards sent to children’s homes

Sharing Core Routines with Families – sit spots, book of nature/immediate surroundings, go on a wander, play games, gratitude/thanksgiving

Staying connected to community: we can still interact with it; use technology to bring us closer to nature and each other

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## RESOURCES

The Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools  
[www.erafans.org](http://www.erafans.org)

*Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, by Jon Young, Ellen Haas and Evan McGowan

Connect with wild school families at <https://wilderchild.com/>

Flow Learning - <https://www.sharingnature.com/flow-learning.html>

Doodle with famous children's author, Mo Willems  
<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/mo-willems/>

