

# Early Learning Centre

## Demonstration Lab School

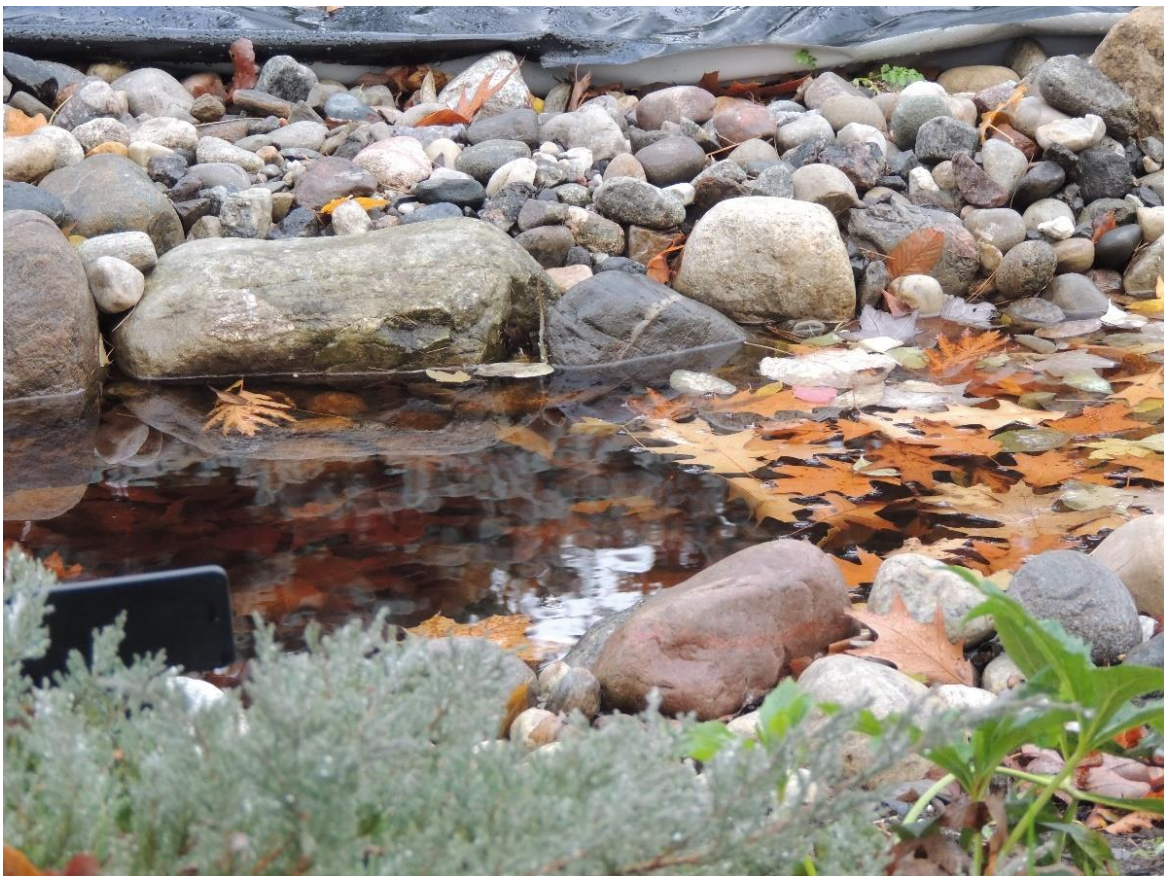


# Preschool

# Nature Based Program

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## History of Nature Based Programs

In the 1950's, Nature Based programs began appearing in Scandinavian and European countries before gaining momentum many years later in North America.

Children and educators build a relationship with the land through regular and repeated access to the same natural space over an extended period of time (Child and Nature Alliance Canada, 2018) and are given ample time to explore, examine and learn about the world around them. The repetition allows the children to become very comfortable in and knowledgeable about their environment.



# Land Acknowledgement

The Early Learning Centre Nature Based Program takes place on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin people. Traditionally known as ‘Anishinaabe’, Algonquin people are the original inhabitants of the wide swath of territory along the Ottawa River.

*Niminwendam omaa ayaayan*

*Anishinaabe for*  
*I am happy you are here*

# Location and Place



Our forest is located on Campus. It is close to the Early Learning Centre, (K building) within the gardens and forested space of the Algonquin College Horticulture Grounds.



## Our Journey

The Nature Based Program at the Early Learning Centre has been an integral part of the Preschool Program since 2013. That summer, two of the Early Childhood Educators attended the practical portion of the Forest School Practitioners' Course for one week of intensive training at Wesley Clover Park in Kanata, held by Forest Schools Canada.

The philosophy of 'Forest School' was the basis for the beginnings of our own 'Forest Fridays'. Since then, there have been many adjustments and adaptations made to our Nature Based Program but a few key elements remain the same:

- 🌿 we visit the same natural area, building a relationship and comfort level with the land
- 🌿 we spend some time each morning as a group, with Educators as co-learners, supporting the children's inquiries
- 🌿 we spend some time each morning engaged in child-directed learning, with the Educators as observers and co-learners, to prompt questions and extend children's learning



## A Morning in the Forest

Our morning starts at the Early Learning Centre, with children and Educators dressing in layers appropriate for the weather. We walk together to the Horticulture (M) Building where we have our first ‘gathering’. Here, we begin observing our surroundings and noticing changes that may have happened since our last visit. We remember the expectations for our walk through the gardens (stay with the group and use your senses) and revisit the safety precautions for the forest: how to carry sticks safely, how to climb a tree safely, how to be near water safely, and most importantly – when to come back to an educator. Our signal for the children to return to the Educators is a ‘wolf howl’. We practice this every time we venture to the forest and the children know it means to ‘come back fast’.

From this gathering we meander through the gardens, noticing changes and following the children’s lead. This is a time for observation and to reattune ourselves with nature.



Once we choose a destination in the forest (we have many choices of places to spend time and pick a spot based on that day’s site assessment), we gather a second time. During this gathering we choose our boundaries and bring the children’s attention to any particular safety precautions for that space.

The children are then encouraged to explore and enjoy themselves. It is a child-led time where they are afforded the freedom and choice to play how they wish. This may be independently or with a peer, running and climbing, investigating and exploring nature and being loud or quiet. The educators use this time to keenly observe children, notice where their interests lie and how to support their 'being'. It may involve stepping *in* to support the children through a challenge or it may mean stepping *back* and letting their creativity and independence take over the experience.

As the morning goes on, we may venture to another part of the forest, or we may be engrossed in the space and stay in one area. Eventually though, it is time for our final gathering.

We wind down our morning by 'howling' for the children to gather for the last time. We all sit in a group and discuss our experience. Who did we spend time with? What did we play? What did we see? What did we hear? The educators encourage the children to focus their attention on their senses. We discuss the particular nature that is surrounding us at that moment – trees, clouds, weather, groundcover – how does it make us feel? The last part of this gathering is to do a Sit Spot.



Having a Sit Spot gives the children time to calm their bodies and brains. The children are encouraged to sit or lay down and be silent and still. They may choose to leave their eyes open or closed. This is a time for personal reflection

and peace. Over time, this Sit Spot time lengthens from one or two minutes per session to almost 10 minutes when the children have more practice with self-regulation.

When the Sit Spot is over, we quietly stand and begin our walk back to the Early Learning Centre for lunch. The children leave with experiences to share with parents and peers.

## Nature Based Learning

The pedagogy emphasizes inquiry-based learning through play and hands-on discovery. The experiences are typically rooted in the seasonal happenings of the natural world and in investigating the biodiversity that the wooded area has to offer.



The Ministry of *Education's How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (2014)* guides the Nature Based Program and its curriculum. Our ELC Registered Early Childhood Educators use observations and documentation to plan, implement and evaluate Nature Based learning programs that encourage activity exploration, problem-solving, creativity, independence, curiosity, and innovation.

***Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives.***

*Thomas Berry*



Our Nature Based Program is organized around the four foundations that are important for children to grow and develop. These foundations are used to support children's future potential.



*Belonging:*

Our goals are to cultivate and build positive relationships and create a sense of belonging with children, adults, and the world around them. Educators create a collaborative approach to learning ensuring each child's voice is heard.

*Wellbeing:*

Our program supports and emphasizes social, emotional, physical, creative, and cognitive aspects of healthy child development. Exploration, critical thinking, imagination, and community are all qualities encouraged through our experiences in nature.

*Engagement:*

Every child is an active learner. They learn through exploring the world with their bodies, minds, and senses. The program offers challenging opportunities to be innovative and problem-solve. Educators are co-learners with the children- they listen and observe inspiring meaningful experiences.

*Expression:*

Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways. Our program encourages and supports communication and expression in all forms.





## The Benefits of a Nature Based Program

- Improved confidence, social skills, communication, motivation and concentration
- Improved physical stamina, fine and gross motor skills
- Increased knowledge of environment
- Healthy and safe risk taking
- Improved creativity and resilience
- Improved self-regulation
- Reduced stress and increased patience

Source: Forest and Nature School in Canada, June 2014



## Safety Precautions and Risk Management

The health and well-being of the children is a priority for the Educators at all times. Weather conditions are taken into consideration when planning our visits based on the ELC's policies and procedures.

### *What to Wear in the Forest*

<b><i>Warm Weather (Spring, Summer)</i></b>	<b><i>Cold Weather (Autumn, Winter)</i></b>
<i>T-shirt</i>	<i>Sweater</i>
<i>Jacket</i>	<i>Warm winter jacket</i>
<i>Sun hats</i>	<i>Winter boots</i>
<i>Rain boots</i>	<i>Snow pants</i>
<i>Rain jackets</i>	<i>Neck warmer</i>
<i>Waterproof pants</i>	<i>Waterproof mittens</i>

Environmental checks are carried out on route and when we arrive in the wooded area. The Educators scan for hazards to avoid and identify potential risks to children's health (litter, tripping hazards, structure safety and water areas).

During our time in the woods there is an element of risky play. Risky play is a natural part of children's play and might involve climbing trees, jumping off rocks and using large sticks. Risky play is essential for children's motor skills, balance, coordination and body awareness. The

Educators closely supervise and observe the children so that they can offer encouragement and help when needed. Rest assured that risky play does not mean 'anything goes' and that the children will be encouraged and to take risks that are appropriate for their individual physical and cognitive developmental levels.



## Equipment for the Nature Program

An Emergency Bag is always brought to the Nature Program with the Educators. The contents of the emergency bag can differ depending on the time of year and environmental conditions, the location being used, and the children's interests.



### Essential Equipment

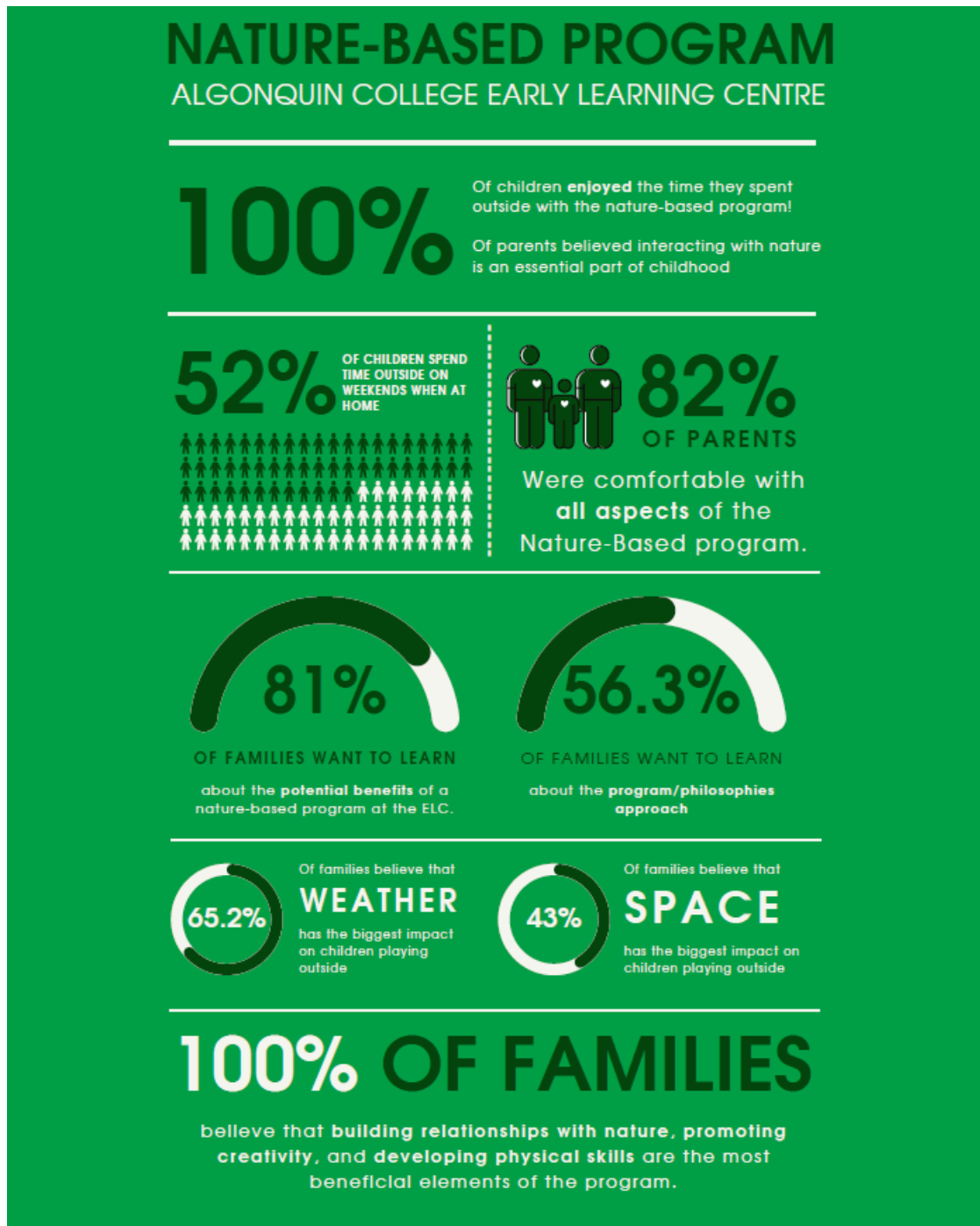
- 🌿 First Aid Kit
- 🌿 Medical information for each individual and Emergency contact cards
- 🌿 Communication device (mobile phone and/or walkie talkie)
- 🌿 Medication for individuals
- 🌿 Wet wipes, hand sanitizer
- 🌿 Tissues

### Other Equipment

- 🌿 Water bottles
- 🌿 Tarp, rope
- 🌿 Magnifying glasses
- 🌿 Information pamphlets
- 🌿 Notebooks and pencils
- 🌿 Children's explorer bags



# Encouraging Your Child's Love of the Natural World



Results from a Parent Survey completed at the Early Learning Centre in February 2021 indicated that all families believed that 'interacting with nature was an essential part of childhood'. However, many parents acknowledged that weather conditions, space availability and time were barriers to enjoying the outdoors with their children.

Enjoying your time outdoors is so important and spending time in nature is easier than you think.

**DRESS FOR THE WEATHER AND GET OUTSIDE**

**If you have 20 minutes**  
Lay on the grass and look at the clouds

**If you have 20 minutes**  
Go on a sound walk - what do you hear?

**If you have 1 hour**  
Pack a picnic and eat at the park

**If you have 1 hour**  
Go on a 'texture hunt' - how many different textures can you feel?

**Spending the day outside**  
Go on an adventure! Find a new trail or park that you haven't visited before - what's different?

**Don't just tell children about the world. Show them.**  
Penny Whitehouse

## Natural Spaces In and Around Ottawa

*Natural Areas Map*

<https://ottawa.ca/en/living-ottawa/environment-conservation-and-climate/conservation-areas#exploring-ottawas-greenspaces>

*Parks and Green Spaces*

<https://ottawa.ca/en/recreation-and-parks/parks-and-green-space#park-locations>

<https://ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places/parks>

*Conservation Areas*

<https://ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places/greenbelt#>



## Books to Read

### *Infants (birth to 24 months)*

Bright Baby Touch & Feel Baby Animals: Written by Roger Priddy

The Sun Is A Shine: Written by Leslie A. Davidson

Everything Grows: Written by Raffi

### *Toddlers (14 months- 3 years)*

What Are Stars: Written and illustrated by Katie Daynes

Black Bird Yellow Sun: Written and illustrated by Steve Ligh

Hello, Rain! Written by Kyo Maclear

This Is Your World: Written by Tilly Temple

### *Preschoolers (2.5 - 6 years)*

The Duck Who Didn't Like Water: Written by Steve Small

The Giving Tree: Written by Shel Silverstein

A Walk in The Forest: Written by Maria Dek

Because Of An Acorn: Written by Lola M. Schaefer

### *Books for Families*

Tree: Written by Britta Teckentrup

Forest: Written by Kate Moss Gamblin

Into the Forest: Written by Christiane Dorion

The Forest: Written by Riccardo Bozzi

Wisdom of Tree: How Trees Work Together to Form A Natural Kingdom: Written by Lita Judge

Outdoor Scientist: The Wonder of Observing the Natural World: Written by Temple Grandin

Most of The Better Natural Things in The World: Written by Dave Eggers

Wonders of The Natural World: Written by David Burnie

## References

Forest School Canada. (2015). History of Forest and Nature School. Retrieved from <http://www.forestschoolcanada.ca/home/about-forest-school/history-of-forest-school>

Louv, R. (2008). Lost Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Algonquin books.

Ministry of Education (2014). How Does Learning Happen: Ontario Pedagogy for the Early Years. <https://www.ontario.ca/how-does-learning-happen-ontarios-pedagogy-early-years>

