

3-PART FRAMEWORK FOR NATURE-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING:

Maintaining A Loving, Cohesive Community While Promoting Nature Play & Learning

It's not how we want to run our forest and nature preschools. We don't typically have screen time at all because we're focused on unfettered, unstructured outdoor play. Yet here we are, reaching out through online platforms to nurture the precious relationships with children and families in our programs. If you're struggling to straddle the hybrid world of nature and technology amid the COVID-19 pandemic, here are three ways to move between class time online and meaningful nature-based learning.

Part I: Rhythm of the [Virtual] Day

Plan a weekly call with families on a platform like GoToMeeting, Zoom, GoogleHangouts, FaceTime, or Skype. This will allow real-time interaction with children and families. Calls should be brief, as they are far more teacher-directed than a typical day. We suggest 20-30 minute calls for preschool-age children. Here is a sample breakdown:

Greetings: Children say hello as friends and teachers join in. This is a joyful cacophony of hellos!

Welcome song: Grounded in routine, everyone sings and/or signs their familiar opening song.

Gratitude and thanksgiving: We breathe deeply together and hone in on something we feel grateful in this moment. Sharing is always optional.

Orientation: We remind children to use a natural object such as a "talking leaf" during discussions. When they hold up their object, the teacher knows they have something to share with the group. Orient children and parents of what we intend to do on today's call.

Seasonal inspiration: We continue to build off of the childrens' interests, skill development, and seasonal happenings. During this segment, we pose a question; share something special from nature; lead an interactive game, song, or story; offer a recipe; or spark outdoor inquiry through an experiment. This motivates children to act upon future learning outdoors and at home (see follow-up email and ideas for nature kits below).

Closing: We reflect on ideas shared during the call. Anyone may offer remarks, questions, and optional stories of the day (or week). It's helpful to end with a challenge or reminder (EX. remember your sit spot routine!). We share gratitude for our time together.

Good-bye song: We sing again to signal our time together has finished.

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Part 2: Follow-up Email for Families

Families are dealing with a variety of stressors right now. First and foremost, we must offer grace, kindness, and no judgment of how each family chooses to participate in our virtual teaching efforts. That said, a weekly email is a wonderful follow-up for families to receive information to help them take learning off the screen and back outside. Here are ideas for your follow-up email.

- Simple step-by-step documents for nature activities, recipes, etc. (MS Word docs or PDF files)
- Websites and links to developmentally appropriate nature-based experiences families can do at home:
 - Learning apps with activities and experiences (EX. Seesaw, Bloomz, StoryPark apps that your school community uses)
 - Websites with lessons, easy field guides, and citizen science projects (EX. Audubon Society, NWF/Ranger Rick, DNR field guides, National Geographic, DNR websites, Project Monarch Watch, iNaturalist, etc.)
 - Pinterest boards curated by your school or like-minded organizations
 - Parenting or homeschool blogs
- Video clips of teachers demonstrating nature-based experiences/activities (EX. demonstration of nature walk, art project, science experiment, song, creative movement, poetry, plant/animal identification, storytelling, etc.)
- Suggestion for collaborative projects that families can contribute to even while social distancing (EX. group nature alphabet: every child looks for a letter in nature and posts the picture online to contribute as a team)

Part 3: Nature Kits or Care Packages

You may have an ideal location that you can leave special nature kits or care packages for families to pick up during the week. (Take common sense precautions if the spread of illness is a concern.) These kits can be a way for you to curate materials and activities as a grab bag for families. It's a fun surprise to see what's inside! As with the online call and email, it is completely optional for families to pick up a nature kit but having it available is an important option for many families.

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10 Ideas for your Nature Kit:

- Whittled scribe with mud paint recipe
- Seeds with instructions for eggshell planting
- Stone with ideas to collage a story stone
- Stick challenge to build something such as a fort, gnome home, or bird nest
- Clean half gallon milk carton with instructions to make a birdhouse
- Tree cookie with instructions to create a teensy mandala on its surface
- Buttons, embroidery needle, and thread with instructions to make a lost sock puppet
- Scavenger hunt mapping challenge
- Acorn caps and instructions to create a matching game
- Paint swatch sets with an invitation to match colors in nature

Just as forest and nature preschools offer a fluid daily rhythm, this framework has plenty of elbow room for your interpretation. No two school communities are alike, but we hope you find a comfortable groove applying it to your situation. For further resources, visit our Teacher Resources Portal at www.erafans.org/teacher-resources.