

# 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: A Guide to 40+ Outdoor Learning Experiences in All Seasons](#): (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

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

## 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 seasonal rhythms – 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 – Inspired by Jon Young, Ellen Haas, and Evan McGown's [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 may include: 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 in a fluid learning cycle. (See Joseph Cornell's [Sharing Nature with Children](#).) You can meet children where they are at 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

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

## IDEAS FOR NATURE-BASED [HOME]SCHOOLING

This is but a small sampling of activities to promote nature connection, nature-based learning, and play.

Experience or Activity	Connecting with your Class Community	Connecting with the Land and Natural Environment	Self-awareness, Reflection, and Self-care
Nature walks	<p>Walk a familiar path and leave something behind for others to find. EX. Identify a community tree that everyone leaves an offering or message on - each person discovers what the last person shared</p> <p>Nature art projects and/or ephemeral land art is a way to create beauty for the next visitors</p> <p>Share stories from walks - What was your favorite part of the walk? What sounds did you hear? What signs of the season did you notice? What strikes you as special or strange?</p>	<p>Make and log wildlife observations</p> <p>Do a plant/animal ID (Bioblitz your yard)</p> <p>Go earthing/barefoot walking</p> <p>Invitations in nature: notice the contrast of shadow and light; notice the sounds around you; notice the feeling of the earth under you body</p> <p>Find and follow tracks</p>	<p>Meditation in nature or silent walk</p> <p>Self reflection – 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> <p>Walk your neighborhood or in a park to feel connected with the community. Many others have walked this path before you, an insight that brings comfort</p>
Gardening & Growing	<p>Start seeds for that can eventually be harvested and shared with others</p> <p>Take turns caring for the school CSA, farm animals, or other gardens. This can be done with social distancing in mind with a thoughtful sign-up procedure</p>	<p>Make direct contact with the soil</p> <p>Research the needs of plants and benefits to wildlife and start a Master Plant List</p> <p>Start compost experiments</p>	<p>Ground yourself in your green space</p> <p>Silent gardening moments</p> <p>Observe of pollinators in the garden; reflect through art and poetry</p>

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

	Grow garden shelters like beanpole tipis or sunflower houses	Get to know the plants that grow under your feet (field guides and iNaturalist app)  Prepare, dig, plant, and tend a garden	
Collections	Create collections using recycled containers or egg cartons; share collections with others via photographs, video, FB group, or app like StoryPark  Create a collections bin where children can take a collection to their home	Rocks  Leaves  Get to know plants in your area; mindfully forage wild edibles and medicinals with the honourable harvest principle	What natural items call to you in nature? Do you prefer to collect one item over another?
Journaling	Online format with children in other countries or pen pals	Sketching in the field  Tracing materials, rubbings, etc.	Do daily reflection journaling or keep a phenology diary of changes each season  Stories of the day
Live animals	Volunteer 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 and animal feeders  Create nest helpers and insect 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” where people can take natural loose parts home with them	Make a nature museum as simple as a shelf or tray  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?

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

Mapping	<p>Map your neighborhood; your neighbors, local businesses</p> <p>Head in a direction and map what you see! EX: Mapping North</p>	<p>Map your space, develop a scavenger hunt</p> <p>Follow a scented trail – use an essential oil and dab it on natural items on your walk, can you follow the smell?</p>	<p>Reflect on favorite parts of your neighborhood/the space you mapped</p> <p>Notice what you feel curious about and what draws you in to its beauty in the space you explore</p>
Storytelling	<p>Ask and listen to stories from elders about their experience with the land</p> <p>Look up stories from the indigenous people from your area</p> <p>Share stories with one another through digital recordings and apps (seesaw app)</p>	<p>Invitation to connect with a tree: go find a tree and “hear” its story, tell your tree a your story</p>	<p>Listen to recorded meditations for bedtime</p>
Wild nature play	<p>Connecting to a space that is in your community, for example: a local park</p>	<p>Climbing, rolling, spinning, jumping, slithering, digging, building</p>	<p>Reflecting/sharing your favorite discovery or part of nature play</p>
Art experiences	<p>Creating art for others enjoyment</p>	<p>Using natural materials as mediums: Leaf art, natural ink, painting rocks, etc.</p>	<p>What do you find beautiful? How does this art make you feel?</p>

## HOW TEACHERS CAN STAY CONNECTED WITH CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Virtual Learning – face-to-face calls as a class, with families, or with individual children; sharing recorded videos (EX. nature minute or weekly walks in the field); offering simple nature-based lesson plans, recipes, and activities to families; sending letters and postcards to children; using puppets, story, and song to connect with children; “Little Fox” adventures

# STAYING CONNECTED THRU NATURE PLAY & LEARNING

Nature Kits - offer simple materials and recycled items that children can use for outdoor activities

Sharing Core Routines with Families – introducing grounding habits from nature school (EX. sit spots, sharing gratitude/thanksgiving, or telling favorite “story of the day”); making book of nature/immediate surroundings; go on a wander; play games as a family

Building Community From a Distance – we can still interact with it; use technology to bring us closer to nature and each other; group nature alphabet challenge; community tree to send messages of love or hope; ephemeral art offerings leaving beauty and wonder for the next visitor

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (Teacher Resource Portal)  
[www.erafans.org/teacher-resources](http://www.erafans.org/teacher-resources)

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

[Wilder Child](#) to connect with wild school families

## BOOKS

[\*Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature\*](#) by Jon Young, Ellen Haas and Evan McGowan

[\*Mapmaking with Children: Sense of Place Education for the Elementary Years\*](#) by David Sobel

[\*Nature Play Workshop for Families: A Guide to 40+ Outdoor Learning Experiences in All Seasons\*](#) by Monica Wiedel-Lubinski and Karen Madigan, 2020

[\*Nature-Based Learning for Young Children: Anytime, Anywhere, on Any Budget\*](#) by Julie Powers and Sheila Williams Ridge

[\*Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practices Guidebook\*](#) by NAAEE, 2019

[\*Play the Forest School Way: Woodland Games and Crafts for Adventurous Kids\*](#) by Peter Houghton and Jane Woroll, 2016

[\*Sharing Nature with Children\*](#) by Joseph Cornell

