

# Introduction

Learning in nature is certainly not a new concept. It is as old as time and human existence. But in recent years, a renewed interest to unplug and get back to basics has brought this movement to the forefront of early childhood education. Until now, nature-based approaches have been loosely lumped into a bucket containing environmental education, outdoor education, or recreation, unless a school or program explicitly refers to itself as a forest or nature preschool, forest kindergarten, or something similarly named. As it stands, nature-based early childhood education (NBECE) consists of predominantly middle- and upper-income families and is difficult for most low-resourced families to access.

This book provides a definition of NBECE as it is applied in American early childhood settings. Furthermore, NBECE is defined as its own educational philosophy. This definition is based on my perspective as an educator, founding director of three nature-based preschool programs, advocate for local and national initiatives in early childhood environmental education, and proponent of playful nature-based learning. My experience has unfolded over more than two decades, rooted in the greater Baltimore-Washington, DC, metropolitan region and now reaching practitioners across the United States and around the globe. On a more personal note, my roles as aunt and mother are also inseparable from the beliefs and practices that follow in this book. This is all to say that there are many facets of nature-based education and many ways to serve and support one another. This longing to provide access, build capacity, and nurture deep nature connection is what frames my vision. I share my story here to help color the experiences that have led me to writing this book.

## Blazing A Trail in Nature-Based Education

---

For more than two decades I have pondered, tested, and revised my views on nature pedagogy and nature-based education. As the founding director of a licensed, NAEYC-accredited nature preschool at Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills, Maryland, I began to find my way. From my earliest moments leading a Children's Nature Series in 1998 until it grew into a full-fledged preschool in 2009, I had countless days of joy in the field but also felt great failure and frustration. I have always shared the children's sincere sense of

wonder and curiosity about the natural world, but translating outdoor learning into a preschool program is not nearly as straightforward as that.

As the director of a nature preschool, I was confronted with typical tasks: creating policies, aligning curriculum with standards, performing assessments, overseeing enrollment, collecting tuition, connecting with parents, training the staff ... you get the picture. The *real* challenge was to find a way to accomplish these tasks while underscoring the power of nature-based learning. In other words, remaining true to our vision. At the time, there was seemingly no guidance for nature preschool directors like me. I was aware of the Dodge Nature Center in West St. Paul, Minnesota, and Audubon Naturalist Society's Nature Preschool in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Beyond that, I knew of only about a dozen or so programs in the United States that were nature preschools. There was a lot I needed to learn. I came to realize that we needed to build a network to find support.

My time at the nature center proved invaluable. I became a naturalist by lived experience on the trails, by finding answers to questions alongside curious little children. I was forced to dig deep and learn how to be more flexible, more patient, and more forgiving. I developed programs for diverse audiences of children and teachers in low-resourced communities in Baltimore, which was in stark contrast to the population attending the nature preschool. I collaborated on a remarkable nature play-space project, harnessing the ideas and skills of volunteers, teachers, and children. Significantly, I also began to lead professional development courses for other teachers.

As I inched further along on my journey, more and more teachers would seek out advice from our growing nature preschool. This longing for relevant training and networking crystallized my desire to grow the movement of NBECE and to help other teachers succeed.

After resigning from Irvine Nature Center in 2016, more determined than ever to form a nonprofit association to support nature-based educators, I got to work. And with tremendous encouragement from regional founding members, we launched the nonprofit Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools to provide services, support, and inspiration to early childhood professionals to advance the field of NBECE and encourage lifelong appreciation for our natural world. In 2024, we officially became the Association for Nature-Based Education (ANBE) to better reflect our national reach and to more aptly describe our mission's work.

Even as ANBE was beginning to take root, I had the honor of co-founding a forest preschool program at Carrie Murray Nature Center in Baltimore, starting

in 2017. This beautiful vision for more equitable access to NBECE in Baltimore coalesced alongside two visionary colleagues, Monica French and Mepi Neill, under the guidance of Mary Hardcastle at Baltimore City Recreation and Parks. As a third offering to my local community, ANBE launched Notchcliff Nature Programs with an immersive forest preschool at Glen Meadows Retirement Community in Glen Arm, Maryland, in 2018.

My journey, paired with the significant contributions of my fellow colleagues, has led me to identify the following “7 Principles of Nature-Based Early Childhood Education.” In the spirit of helping other educators like you, I hope these principles will provide solid footing for your professional journey. Ponder them. Challenge them. And blaze your own understanding.

## 7 Principles of Nature-Based Early Childhood Education

---

1. **Nature** is the central organizing feature of the curriculum, school, or program for children ages birth to 8 years old. Children learn in, about, with, and as a part of the natural world (Bailie 2012; Bailie & Finch 2015; NAAEE 2019; Sobel 2016).
2. **Direct experiences** with nature, natural materials, and outdoor environments take place in every season, in all kinds of weather (NAAEE 2019).
3. **Learning is child-directed** and occurs during playful, emergent outdoor experiences (NAAEE 2019). Inquiry, observation, and creative problem solving emerge as children discover seasonal surprises. The underlying processes behind learning are valued above end products.
4. **Children freely make choices and take risks.** Children are respected as capable learners who are afforded time, space, and permission to make independent decisions. Children are empowered and supported in appropriate risk-taking (NAAEE 2019).
5. **Teachers are facilitators** who guide meaningful learning opportunities and manage risks. Teachers have knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education and environmental education (NAAEE 2019; Sobel 2016). Teachers ensure safety and provide individualized accommodations to support every child’s needs.

6. **Place-based underpinnings** honor the land, local ecosystem, Indigenous culture, and the diversity found in both natural and human communities. The quest for environmental justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion is inseparable from cultivating respect for all living things.
7. **Values promote environmental literacy and ecological identity** through a shared vision of personal responsibility to care for each other and the natural world (Brusaferro 2020; NAAEE 2019; Sobel 2016). Values of empathy, gratitude, kindness, respect, caretaking, and perseverance are reflected in the sustainable practices and ethos of the learning community.

NBECE is already being applied in a growing number of forest and nature preschools and is spreading into every imaginable early learning environment. As you examine the many facets of nature-based education presented, I hope you will discover why it has become an essential approach in modern-day early childhood education.

## Using This Book

---

Each chapter contains topics that form the backbone of a nature pedagogy framework. The concepts and practices presented here are enmeshed in a holistic, nature-based approach to teaching and learning. This makes it challenging to address certain topics in only one chapter because they interrelate and overlap. As you read, keep in mind that each part is interconnected to the whole. Each chapter explores specific topics and strategies, but none of these components stand alone in practice.

At the opening of each chapter, you will find Guiding Questions as a starting point for reading. There are further Reflection Questions at the conclusion of each chapter to encourage more thought about what you have read. These questions may challenge previously held beliefs or practices as you examine how to apply new knowledge to your unique setting. The teacher's Call to Action in each chapter is a related challenge to help you deepen your understanding of nature pedagogy.

Each chapter also includes examples of how NBECE is applied in programs across the United States, along with beautiful photos from nature-based programs. Research and best practices from nature-based early childhood education experts provide diverse perspectives for you to consider. **(References for this book can be found at <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/nature-based-ece>)** Vignettes in each chapter offer insight from nature-based educators and administrators

embedded in the field and illustrate the power of NBECE with young children. Templates are shared to help you implement the strategies provided. There are many more facets to examine in this rapidly expanding field, and while this book covers a lot of ground, there are still stones left unturned. Let this book be a resource to you, one that you can scribble notes in the margin, discuss with families at pickup, or share with colleagues over lunch as you strive to improve outcomes for your precious students. Use it as a springboard to hone your craft as an educator. You may move between chapters or features of interest, skip to the resources in the appendix, or read it cover to cover. However you choose to connect with this book, I sincerely hope you find seeds of inspiration that benefit children and our natural world.