

WHO IS JOHN THE SNAIL AND HOW DO I MEET HIM?

PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT IN A FOREST NATURE PROGRAM

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BACKGROUND

Using a nature-based pedagogical approach that includes regular and repeated access to natural settings, environmental, inquiry-based, emergent and integrated learning (Forest School Canada, 2014) and relationships that support reciprocity in nature, the research aims to:

- Better understand parent perspectives on how time spent in nature and natural settings influences their child's play, learning and holistic development and their connections in and to the natural world;
- Contribute to the expanding literature and advocacy efforts on how best to support and advocate for responsive, inclusive, place and land-based practice (Sobel, 2004) that brings attention to the pedagogical significance of children's relations with place, plants, and animals and supports risky play.



QUESTIONS & METHODS



Questions

- What are the motivations and influences that encourage parents to expose their children to nature, through the Forest Nature Program (FNP) at the Humber Child Development Centre?
- What benefits do parents recognize when they expose their children to nature?
- How do parents perceive the value of nature for their child's development?
- What are the barriers that prevent parents from exposing their children to nature?

Methods included a questionnaire to parents, a walk to the forest nature site with parents and their children, opportunities to eat, play and interact together as well as a semi-structured focus group with parents.

RESULTS

15 families participated in the study. Parents shared that the FNP:

Increases confidence, risk-taking and problem-solving

"He has more confidence climbing on trees and jumping over rocks than on jungle gyms where he's a lot more cautious especially around other kids. It is interesting to see that."

"This environment is changing all the time, so they have to adapt and they also get to choose what they want to do."

Nurtures inquiry-based learning and story-telling

"She's naturally curious...it is a very natural way of learning."

"He sees everything and knows everything."

"She can recognize all kinds of birds, chickadees for sure. I love it when she brings me home sticks and the little seeds that she finds, it's very exciting."

"They tell their own story, their own words: she saw a frog and then the frog was in her play."

Promotes health and wellness

"It is a total change of mind frame and it's calming for all of us"

Encourages stewardship and reciprocity

"We have a bunch of dandelions on our front lawn. She said we can't pick them, the bees need them, they need to suck the nectar out of them. She says, don't step on them, don't look at them, leave them where they are!"

Barriers/concerns: lack of programs in schools; unaware of "wild" spaces available to families; presence of ticks and potential health risks.



CONCLUSIONS

Families want accessible nature-based programs that support children's curiosity, inquiry, holistic well-being and development.

"My kids, being in the Humber daycare, they are learning more about the nature, how to care about the nature and that's a nice thing that we didn't learn, we regret we did not learn. We learned from our experience, but here you are teaching them very well. That is the first thing we should teach our kids, how to protect your environment because in the future it will be good for the coming generations."

"I want our kids not to just learn about nature but to be able to enjoy it throughout their lifetime....understand the impact that humans have on nature and how fragile our ecosystems are, instilling a responsibility, maybe in a way to protect this."

"For me, it's another way to explore or teach children about what is going on around them. We are indoor persons and we don't usually go out, and coming here I see the way he interacts with others too."

"I really like that he gets fresh air every day in this environment. Many daycares don't offer this. It's a really great experience."



References:

Forest School Canada (2014). Forest and Nature School in Canada: A head, heart, hands, approach to outdoor learning. Toronto

Sobel, D. (2004). Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities (Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society.

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