

Children 'more alive when they are outside': Quebec nature-based daycare takes kids out of classroom ^[1]

Even without government subsidies, La Garderie Nature has a waiting list

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Source: CBC Radio (Sunday Edition)

Format: Video

Publication Date: 28 Feb 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access audio online [18:27] ^[2]

EXCERPTS

A dozen preschoolers laugh and yell as they propel down a snowy hill, screaming with delight as they hit the bumps and plow their sleds into snowdrifts that threaten to bury them.

Their educators stand off to the side, collecting wayward toques and mitts and making sure that the children trudging up the hill aren't in the way of those heading down.

"One, two, three, four ..." one of the educators counts aloud, making sure no one in the group has gone AWOL before they head into the woods.

It's 10 a.m. and -10 C — just another winter morning at La Garderie Nature — Nature's Daycare

"Children are just more alive when they are outside than when we see them inside," says Karine Gravel, the founder of the daycare in Saguenay, Que., a city of 150,000 carved out of the wilderness, 200 kilometres due north of Quebec City.

Gravel, the mother of three- and four-year-old boys, opened La Garderie Nature last October, in a building she helped design that backs onto a forest in the Saguenay suburb of Chicoutimi-Nord.

She was motivated by the thing that upsets her more than anything else: seeing a toddler curled up on a sofa, fixated by a screen.

At the beginning, the forest was a bit like a stranger for them. Now it is like a big friend.- Karine Gravel

The average Canadian three-year-old spends more than two hours a day staring at television or a computer.

A recent World Health Organization study concludes that all that sitting around is harming the health of young children and could have long-term consequences. The WHO recommends all children be physically active at least three hours a day.

So at La Garderie Nature, 78 children, aged five months to five years, spend most of the daylight hours roaming in the woods, climbing up the hills and scooting down trails.

"At the beginning, the forest was a bit like a stranger for them," says Gravel. "Now it is like a big friend — and that is like a miracle for me."

Learning in a forest

Gravel's ideas are influenced by Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf movement, and by Forest Schools, which originated in the early 1950s in Denmark.

Teacher Ella Flatau started taking three-, four- and five-year-olds for long hikes in the woods every day.

Mothers in Copenhagen learned about the walking nursery school and started busing their children to Flatau's daycare in the countryside so they, too, could have that experience.

By the 1970s, her impulse had become a movement.

Today in Denmark one in every 10 kindergartens — more than 500 in all — are in forests or other natural settings. There are Forest Schools all across Europe.

In Canada, many schools offer programs that take children out of the classroom into the forest a few days a week or for special camps that are longer.

But there are few, if any, daycares like La Garderie Nature, where the children spend their days outdoors, five days a week, regardless of the weather.

"When the children arrived, and they got put into this cold environment they cried because they were not used to it," says Gabrielle Hogg, one of the preschool teachers at La Garderie Nature.

"It took a lot of loving and care and gentleness from the teachers to help the children feel at ease, and now they are just expanding and growing."

Risk, autonomy — and freedom

Children are encouraged to direct their own learning — to experiment, to get their feet wet in a stream or stay outside in the rain. They are allowed to climb trees and to jump off rocks.

They learn to stand perfectly still and quietly observe when a shrew runs across the snow.

"It is student-led," says Hogg. "Children are problem-solving every step of the way, and we are just there to make sure that they are safe."

Teachers carry walkie-talkies and count heads constantly.

Marie-Éve Laroche carries an extra-big backpack stuffed with first-aid supplies, toilet paper and diapers — for nature calls, in nature.

Maryse Cloutier-Gélinas used to work as a wilderness survival specialist with adults. Now she teaches preschoolers the joys of winter.

"When we go out in the morning we listen to the snow under our feet and the colder it gets, the crunchier the snow gets," she says. "So they know the weather with the sound of the snow, so it is a whole different world."

"These kids are going to know the forest like no one else does because they are learning to move like the ancients."

A child's cognitive and motor skills are honed in the first five years, says Hogg. When they're outside playing, they are having so much fun that "they don't even realize they're learning."

Waiting list to get in

In Quebec, a licensed, subsidized daycare spot costs parents about \$40 a week — a fraction of what it costs in most provinces.

La Garderie Nature is not yet subsidized by the province, so after tax credits, the fees work out to about \$100 a week per child.

Gravel is working to get the daycare into the government-subsidized system to make La Garderie Nature affordable for families with lower incomes. However, even without offering the subsidies, there is a waiting list to get in.

Two-year-old Théodore and his year-old sister Juliette are two of the lucky ones. Their father, Mathieu Duchesne, works in a mine in northern Quebec.

"They are going to teach them how to grow food outside and walk outside and climb a tree safely," he said.

He shakes his head. "We don't have time to do it ourselves."

Full bellies, sound sleep

All that fresh air makes everyone hungry, and so by 11 a.m., the children troop back up to the top of the hill and head into tents and a teepee set up next to the daycare building. They sit on spruce boughs, around low tables.

Teachers pass around plates of chicken stew, homemade coleslaw and wholewheat bread baked in the daycare's kitchen.

Once bellies are full, it's time to talk about the morning's adventures and sing a few songs. Then everyone heads indoors. Teachers help take off 78 pairs of boots and 78 snowsuits, and everyone gathers around for a story before nap time.

"They use up so much energy," says Hogg. "They've explored, and they've really used up all their different physical, mental, emotional sides to their being."

"They come inside, and they sleep soundly. It's lovely."

It's getting children to feel at home in their natural environment. - Gabrielle Hogg

When Gravel first met parents to discuss her plan to build and open this daycare, she wondered if her ideas about nature-based early education would catch on.

It has succeeded beyond her wildest dreams.

"It almost is a political act," says Hogg, "because it's getting children to feel at home in their natural environment. They start feeling an empathy with it, and that will then enable them to start loving it and caring for it — which will enable them to fight for the future of this planet."

Of course, La Garderie Nature has only been open one season. With the spring will come new challenges, when toddlers and their teachers encounter the swarms of hungry blackflies and mosquitoes.

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