

Guelph outdoor preschool takes the classroom to the meadow ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

GUELPH, ONT.-On a misty day in the rolling hills of Wellington County, a 4-year-old in rubber boots peers through tall grass at a cluster of snails unearthed by the rain.

Beside him, another small boy points.

"Look, now the snails are coming out of their shells!" he crows.

Nearby, a 6-year-old girl clutches a shovel and tromps across the muddy field to dig for worms. A gentle breeze carries the scent of lilacs. On the hill, the blossoming phlox nod their purple heads.

This is the setting of Ontario's first licensed outdoor preschool, scheduled to open this month on the sprawling pastoral grounds of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre, five minutes from downtown Guelph.

It's the kind of scene that founder Masha Kazakevich imagined when she decided to open Guelph Outdoor Preschool, providing parents with a child care option that gets their children outside to play, explore and connect with nature.

"People know intuitively this is good for kids," says Kazakevich. Being outside promotes exercise, stimulates their senses and sparks imaginative play, she says.

"They are learning machines, constantly curious and refining and reassessing. You just can't replace the real world."

Kazakevich, 37, is one of the trailblazers in an outdoor preschool and kindergarten movement hoping to get a foothold in Canada.

At Guelph Outdoor Preschool, children ages 3 to 6 will typically spend most of the morning and at least 90 minutes in the afternoon outside playing games, exploring fields, forests and streams, and tending vegetables in the community garden.

It follows in the footsteps of forest kindergartens that first emerged in Denmark in the 1950s, and have long been thriving in Scandinavia, Germany and Britain.

Now, amid mounting concern over the deteriorating health and fitness of North American kids and their growing disconnect from nature, people here are starting to pay attention. Research is also producing hard evidence that being in green space is good for physical and mental health as well as brain power.

Last fall, a public elementary school in Colwood, B.C., west of Victoria, launched its groundbreaking Nature Kindergarten, drawing attention from across the country and beyond. The 21 students have spent every morning, rain or shine, in the nearby coastal forest and on the shoreline before heading into the classroom for the afternoon. The two-year pilot project has had a ripple effect, with similar outdoor kindergartens and preschools already open or in the works in British Columbia. There are also outdoor initiatives popping up in New Brunswick and Ontario.

"It's becoming part of the public consciousness," says Marlene Power, who in 2008 started a small private program called Carp Ridge Forest Preschool and Kindergarten near Ottawa.

Power is preparing to open a new licensed forest school with local partners in Ottawa, which will eventually accommodate up to 100 children from infancy to age 6, and become a hub for training and research.

She also founded Forest School Canada to build momentum and link outdoor initiatives across the country.

It's an idea that makes sense to parents like Mike Jean of Guelph, whose 3-year-old son Sam is enrolled at Guelph Outdoor Preschool. They are among a handful of families here to visit one spring morning before the official opening.

"I think we've bred the outdoors out of kids," says Jean, as Sam plucks a snail from the grass and drops it into his pail. He chafes at the notion of his energetic little boy being confined to four walls during his early years of school.

Jean is a marketing professional with an eye for trends. And he thinks this one has staying power because it makes sense.

"We're starting to understand the benefits. You're creating an environment where they naturally want to learn and explore. They're engaged and stimulated."

That's what Kazakevich thought two years ago when she watched a YouTube video of Norwegian kindergarten children romping in a snowy forest.

Her son Leo was a baby and all she could think was "if they can have that in Norway, why can't we have one here?"

She has two science degrees, is working on a Master's in landscape architecture, and has connections with the local food and outdoor community. Her husband is an arborist with a landscaping business. They sold their home in Toronto, rented an apartment in Guelph and invested about \$130,000 into the project, hiring a team of early childhood educators and naturalists and renovating the indoor and outdoor space to meet regulations.

Fees will be \$60 a day (\$40 for half-days) compared to an average \$50 for other licensed child care in the vicinity. And ratios will be lower than average, with one staff member for every six children. As a licensed facility the preschool can offer subsidized spots after a year, so it won't only be an option for the privileged.

Supervisor Miranda Gulewitsch says it's "bringing the indoors out," by moving activities like story time, arts and crafts and games outside whenever possible.

The program will be aligned with early learning curriculum, says Gulewitsch, 28, an early childhood educator whose son Gaven will attend two days a week.

While a few other Ontario child care centres promote outdoor learning, the Guelph preschool is the first licensed centre to fully embrace the forest school philosophy.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Education says there are no similar applications. But Kazakevich says she hopes others will soon follow, even in the city, by using pockets of green space in schoolyards, local parks and ravines.

For the last four years, Equinox Holistic Alternative School has quietly been modelling how that can be done.

On a steamy afternoon in east-end Toronto, 17 kindergarteners sit on a circle of stumps in a shady corner of the playground. When teacher Sandee Waite gives the signal to start singing "The Ants Go Marching," a few kids jump to their feet to march while others bang out the beat with rocks and sticks. They all take turns calling out rhyming words as the class invents new verses. No one is told to sit still or raise their hand before speaking.

Around them lie the remnants of their earlier playtime. Shells, pine cones and stones are spread on a mat, books are strewn in a tent, a den has been built out of fallen boughs and sticks.

There's no forest here. But that hasn't stopped the school from offering an urban version of forest kindergarten spent mostly outdoors, even in winter.

The playground, shared with Roden Public School, include trees and a few grassy spots. It's enough for the children to hunt for bugs, spot birds' nests and observe what happens to plants as the seasons change. They also take weekly treks to nearby parks and ravines.

The success of the program has prompted the parent council to launch a fundraiser to replace the concrete that dominates the school grounds with natural materials, woodland gardens and more trees.

"I love teaching like this, I couldn't go back," says Waite, 48.

And the students? "Are you kidding? They love being outside." Even in winter and especially in puddles and mud. The program always has a wait list.

Waite says the key is building on whatever captures the children's attention and spotting opportunities to teach the curriculum within that context.

Math lessons happen as the children add and subtract birds in a tree, or sort stones into groups. They form letters out of sticks, and develop oral skills through storytelling.

When kids are engaged it builds a foundation for becoming confident, curious students and eases the transition into Grade 1, says Waite.

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