



LESSON PLAN

Learning with Nature



RELATED FILM

**Into the Middle
of Nowhere**

BY ANNA FRANCES EWERT



Key Idea

A child’s relationship with nature can be rich with imagination, wonder, and ingenuity. Educational initiatives that include time in nature are shown to serve children’s physical and mental health as well as boost academic performance.

Background

Children around the world are spending less time outdoors and more time indoors engaging with technological devices. According to a 2010 study by The Kaiser Family Foundation, children in the United States devote more than seven hours a day to electronic media use. Research shows that spending more time in nature can provide many physical and mental health benefits for both adults and children.* Outdoor time can improve eyesight, reduce obesity, and reduce stress in children, according to the North Carolina State University Natural Learning Initiative. Mental health benefits include decreased Attention Deficit Disorder, enhanced cognitive abilities, and improvement in academic performance.**

Author and journalist Richard Louv, in his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, coined the term *nature deficit disorder*. Louv links behavioral problems in children with less time in nature and emphasizes the need for unstructured, imaginative play for healthy child development. Movements are gaining ground in the United States and around the world to encourage and support more time in nature for children.*** According to *The New York Times*, part of this trend includes an increase in the number of outdoor preschools that offer nature as a central experience for young children.****

Anna Frances Ewert’s short film, *Into the Middle of Nowhere*, documents a nursery in a forest of Fife, Scotland, where 3 to 5-year-olds let their imaginations soar while playing with each other outdoors in the natural elements. Adult caregivers at the nursery observe the children with little or no interference, allowing the wonder and magic of each child’s relationship with nature to be expressed to the fullest.

*See the University of Minnesota’s, “[Taking Charge of Your Health and Wellbeing](#),” for a summary of health benefits from being in nature.



Film: 15 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- Environmental Science
- Philosophy
- Sociology

COLLEGE

- Environmental Studies
- Film
- Philosophy
- Psychology
- Sociology

THEMES

- Social and emotional learning
- Human connection to the environment
- Youth development
- Creative exploration
- Spontaneity

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



Learning with Nature

***[Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature.](#)” North Carolina State University Natural Learning Initiative.

***For example, the “No Child Left Inside Act,” first introduced to Congress in 2009, reflects the growing research that children’s education benefits from time in nature. Children in Nature, an organization co-founded by Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, integrates research and advocacy to encourage policy changes supporting more time in nature. Conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and National Wildlife Federation have increased their focus on the issue of children and nature. On February 19, 2015, President Obama unveiled the “Every Kid in a Park” initiative, providing all fourth grade students, and their families, free admission to U.S. National Parks and other federal lands.

****Lillian Mongeau, [“Preschool Without Walls,”](#) The New York Times. December 29, 2015.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, behavioral, and sociocultural perspectives.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior on individual and species’ chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the film by telling students they will be watching a film about a group of young children and their outdoor classroom in a nursery in Scotland. The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery, designed for children ages 3-5, supports young learners as they interact freely with nature and each other.



Learning with Nature

Ask students to make a list of the pros/cons of being indoors and the pros/cons of being outdoors. Write their responses on the board. What are their favorite outdoor activities that made the list? Ask students to explain why.

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to watch the film and take notes. Ask students to pay attention to the activities of the children in the film: What are the children doing? How do they interact with the forest? How do they relate to each other?

Ask students to think about nature as a teacher. What might the children in the film learn from their time in nature?

Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- What are the main activities of the children captured in the film? Make a list of the specific scenarios.
- How are the adults portrayed in the film? What does this say about their roles at the nursery?
- The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery does not provide toys to the children. Do you think this is an effective policy? Why or why not? Ask students to support their answers with evidence in the film.
- The nursery, according to The Educate Scotland review group, is described as having strengths that encourage and support “motivated children who are confident, resilient and playful learners” and “children as leaders of their own learning through play.” What are some examples in the film that support these statements?
- A common theme running through Ewert’s films is resilience. For example, another one of Ewert’s films documents a single mother living in poverty in Brazil. Resilience can be defined, according to the Oxford dictionary, as the ability to recover or adapt quickly from difficult conditions. Synonyms include adaptability, flexibility, or spirited. What does resilience mean to you? In what ways does this film convey the theme of resilience? Do you think this film would be a good story to share with parents and teachers of young learners? Why or why not?



- Do you think spending more time in nature can influence your decision to protect it? If so, why?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes for a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. In the book, *Last Child In the Woods*, by Richard Louv, a fourth grader is quoted as saying, “I like to play indoors better ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are.” If you were to write a letter to persuade this child to play outdoors, what would you write? In a paragraph, describe your own experiences, based on your relationship to technology and nature, to make your point. Include some of the benefits of nature that you have experienced as well as some of the negative impacts of technology and electronics. How does technology influence your daily decisions? (CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2)
2. Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists of our time, said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? At the preschool age, do you think imagination is more important than knowledge? Why or why not?
3. According to a story in [The New York Times](#), a mother, whose child attends Fiddleheads Forest School, said, “In indoor spaces, teachers have planned everything. Here, you never know what you’re going to see.” What could be the value of this way of learning? Write a paragraph using examples from the film to back up your statement. (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)



Learning with Nature

4. “[Every Kid In a Park](#)” is a program created by the Obama administration to support fourth graders, and their families, to interact with nature. Each student can receive a pass with free access to all national parks, lands, and waters. The program contains an activity around the principles for environmental stewardship, or the way in which land and waters can be protected. Some of the seven principles include: dispose of waste properly, leave what you find, and respect wildlife. Think of a place in nature—either on land or near water—near your home or school. Select one of the three principles listed and write a paragraph describing an innovative solution to encourage your community to protect the environment near your home.

Resources

Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2005).

Justin C. Sherwin, MBBS, MPhil, Mark H. Reacher, MD, Ruth H. Keogh, DPhil, Anthony P. Khawaja, MBBS, MPhil, David A. Mackey, MD, Paul J. Foster, PhD, “[The Association between Time Spent Outdoors and Myopia in Children and Adolescents, A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis.](#)” The American Academy of Ophthalmology, July 17, 2012.

Lillian Mongeau, “[Preschool Without Walls.](#)” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2015.

“[Connect Kids and Nature: Health Benefits.](#)” National Wildlife Federation.

“[Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8-18-Year-Olds.](#)” The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, January 20, 2010.

[\(Organization\) The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery.](#)

[\(Organization\) Natural Start Alliance.](#)