

My parents put me in a Waldorf school in kindergarten, because the public school in my town had a bad reputation. Throughout the eleven years that I went to Waldorf school, I complained a lot because I felt sheltered compared to the kids I knew from public schools. They had iPods, knew the latest top pop songs, and TV shows. The school I knew from the very beginning of my life, was a world apart from what they knew as school. In kindergarten we made bread, and soup. We learned to paint and draw with the primary colors. When I reached first grade I got my first main lesson book, a place to write down, and illustrate the lessons. I learned about the Greek Gods, and Old Testament stories. I learned to make candles, to paint, to draw, and to sculpt. I learned to sing, and play the violin, cello, and flute. As soon as spring arrived we would take hikes in the woods, where we built forts and made up games with villains, heroes, and princesses. My teacher fabricated stories, using us as the characters, about adventures we would go on as a class. Our knowledge was beyond what could be taught in a classroom.

I thought that every other child in the world was raised like me. Raised with the outdoors as their home, not as a foreign place. Since I have grown up, and met people with different backgrounds, and upbringings, I realize that what I had as a child was a gift. A gift of knowledge from beyond the confines of my home.

What is the most valuable way to educate a child so they will be interested in the world outside of technology? Today, far more children play inside, on electronic devices, and watch TV, than ever before. A study was done by Dr Gavin Sandercock, a children's fitness expert at Essex University, to test a child's strength in 2008, compared to that of a child in 1998. The ten year gap proved that children's strength is declining, but their body mass is staying at the same weight, because muscle has been replaced with fat (Campbell). Introducing children to nature, from the time they are young, helps them develop physically, mentally, and intellectually (CedarSong Nature School). If a child grows up in an environment that does not value nature, they cannot be expected to respect it. To care for something, you must know it very well. Since our world is facing an environmental crisis, upcoming generations need to be informed on how nature is not just a weekend getaway, but a vital part of our survival. How will children become engaged with nature in this continuously technology based world? The answer is education. As educators learn more about the benefits of nature, they have begun to incorporate it in their curriculum, especially in early childhood lesson plans. Rudolf Steiner, founded Waldorf education in the 1800s, a form of education that is based on the head, the heart, and the hands. Steiner accentuates how interaction with nature is healthy for a child's growth (Waldorf Education). Steiner has influenced social and political activism, artistic expression, scientific research, biodynamic farming, and the movement to support people with disabilities. A child cannot grow up in a city of concrete and skyscrapers and be expected to respect nature, they must experience it first hand, and grow to love it. Louie Schwartzberg, a time lapse photographer, captured how a relationship with nature fosters our love for it: "beauty and seduction is nature's tools for survival, because we protect what we fall in love with. It opens our hearts, and makes us realize we are a part of nature and we're not separate from it. When we see ourselves in nature, it also connects us to every one of us, because it's clear that it's all connected in one" (Schwartzberg). If a child is taught the wonders of nature, they are far more likely to develop a relationship with it that will advocate for its protection, this will help them learn, grow, and act to preserve a better world.

Imagine yourself at the age of ten, on a Monday morning. Most children would be getting ready to go sit in a classroom for eight hours, listening to a teacher disperse facts about whatever subject is being taught. But this is not what you are doing. You have the day to explore what you want to. Go outside and explore the backyard, to read a mystery book, and maybe fit in a math lesson. In this setting, you feel comfortable, escaping the suffocating confinements of a classroom. Instead of attempting to learn about the world from behind the four walls of a classroom, you use the world as your classroom. This is an actual form of education. In the 20th century, homeschooling became an alternative to the institutionalized schooling that was taking over the school system. A homeschooling advocate, John Holt, American author and educator, worked to reconstruct the idea of how education should be taught for those who were unhappy with the schooling system. Holt supported the homeschooling, and the unschooling method, which was based on a flexible curriculum that allowed children to work in a “natural, and spontaneous” way, allowing for more freedom of thought (Farenga). In the 1960s and 70s, educators debated the best way to learn: whether standard teaching methods or hands on learning was a better approach to teaching. Some educators believed that the teacher should have the freedom of what to teach at any given time, Holt took this a step further by declaring the student should have the freedom of when, what, and how to learn. Holt believed that a child couldn't thrive in an environment where learning is forced upon them. In Patrick Farenga's book, *John Holt and the Contemporary Origins of Homeschooling*, Holt is quoted stating that, “forcing children to learn makes them unnaturally self-conscious about learning and stifles children's initiative and creativity by making them focus on how to please the teachers and the schools with the answers they will reward best, a situation that creates a fake type of learning” (Farenga).

Ben Hewitt is the father of two sons who learn under the unschooling method. Hewitt says “parents choose to let their children choose, sculpt, direct, and orchestrate their own education”, and as a result children are eager to learn and explore a wide variety of subjects (Olmstead) . The goal is that a student will study the core liberal arts subjects, and then find an area they want to study in depth, while having required knowledge on all of them. The result is that “these young adults [are] given the freedom and tools to build their own career out of passion and excitement, rather than squeezing such pursuits in between mandatory English and Chemistry classes”(Holt). Hewitts sons, in fourth and seventh grade, have all the knowledge that a child their age would have in a public school. They spend about two hours a month in the “classroom”, but otherwise they explore what they are interested in the parameters of the core liberal arts subjects.

Cedarsong Nature School is a kindergarten program that teaches children the importance of building a relationship with nature in order to nourish, and be nourished by it.

Erin Kenny is the founder of Ancient Forest Education Foundation, created in 1996, and founded Cedarsong Nature School in 2006. Kenny grew up playing outside and learning to respect the environment, which carried her into her career. Kenny has a BA in environmental education, and studies environmental law at the University of Washington. She began an outdoor education camp in 2001. Kenny began visualizing a place where children could learn outdoors, “I had a vision of an entirely outdoor preschool, one in which there was no indoor space, where the lessons arose organically as we moved through the natural world”(Cedarsong Nature School). Cedarsong Nature School uses the

term Nature Immersion to define what their program strives to accomplish. Nature Immersion is defined as “unstructured free time in nature resulting in an intimate, deep and personal connection to the natural world” (Cedarsong Nature School). By learning in an outdoor classroom, students develop a relationship with nature that fosters respect for the inhabitants of the natural world.

So why is nature so important? Today, it has become such a distant part of our lives that a term has been developed to describe children who have limited, to no contact with the natural world. Richard Louv, an American author, who writes about the great divide between children and nature today, has done extensive studies on why children should be in nature. His findings show that in this modern age, where everyone is plugged into an electronic device, a lack of contact with nature causes obesity, attention disorders, and depression. He categorizes these illnesses as Nature Deficit Disorder, and says “an expanding body of scientific evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity and overweight, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses”(Louv). This complex disorder has such a simple answer. Spend time outside. In 2005, the American Medical Association published a report that said playing outside acts as a stimulant, “free and unstructured play in the outdoors boosts problem-solving skills, focus and self-discipline. Socially, it improves cooperation, flexibility, and self-awareness. Emotional benefits include reduced aggression and increased happiness...children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors” (Henley). Alan C. Logan, a naturopathic medicine specialist, studies the brain's relationship to nature and how it can lead to health and happiness. People often report that being in nature improves their emotional state, and a recent study showed that the part of the brain associated with love, and empathy is more active when in nature. In contrast, the part of the brain associated with fear and stress is more active in a populated, city environment. A child with acquire knowledge on their environment if they are left to explore (Logan). Kristin Lambert, an outdoor educator, says “children set their own challenges, assess their own risks, take their own responsibility, have their own adventures, and learn from them. And what they learn can't be taught.” (Henley). If schools can implement a plan in their curriculum to to involve nature in their students lives, then the symptoms that children have developed such as depression, and attention disorders can be lessened. Today, it is not vital to our survival to know how to identify plants, and animals, but it is a great skill to know what you are surrounded by, and what your environment is made up of. It cannot hurt to know more, “and if, as a result of that, you develop a love for nature, you may care something for its survival, which is probably not a bad thing” (Henley).

John Dewey, an American philosopher, educational reformer, and psychologist, studied the relationship between the a person’s thoughts and their environment (Godfrey-Smith). He believed that a person in an environment perceives their surroundings, and then acts upon them, in order to shape their relationship with the environment. The way that someone shapes their environment can be by choosing to relocate themselves, or take apart and rebuild their environment (Godfrey-Smith). Education on nature will help a student navigate, and problem solve issues later in life. Today, the biggest issues that we face are directly related to our environment. Global warming, and food security are two problems that in interconnected, and depend on our environment. Getting children

outside, and into the place that their survival depends on, is the first step to solving these issues, “Holt's philosophy that living and learning are interrelated, that we learn more from our mistakes and successes than from tests and instruction, and that it is never too late to learn more about ourselves and the world in which we live” (Ferenga). Humans are constantly shaping their environment, and Dewey identifies a pattern that takes place when this is happening : “experience arises from our physical commerce with the environment, thought responds to experience, thought gives rise to action, and action alters the environment that will shape the next round of experience” (Godfrey-Smith). Since a relationship with nature builds environmental awareness, knowledge, and mental and physical well being, making it a part of a school curriculum is vital to the wellbeing of the students, and the planet.

My experience in nature as a child, combined with my love for nutritious food, as well Education on the natural world will help a student navigate, and problem solve issues later in as my love for the outdoors, inspires me to make a program that every school should have. My idea is an interactive class that teaches students about food, nature, exercise, and the environment. The region that class is designed for is New England, but it could be applied anywhere else. I chose New England because it is where I am from, and because it has four seasons. It can be used in an Urban, and a country environment. The class is for kindergarten, through twelfth grade. Three days a week, students meet to discuss food, nature, exercise, and the environment.

First quarter: The first quarter is outdoors, since the weather is nice, this involves outdoor games, walks in a natural setting- for a school in an urban area a park would serve as a natural setting. During this time, the students would study the flora and fauna that is native the region in which they live, and identify it while outside during class. This will have a creative component where each student gives a presentation on a plant or animal in that region and illustrates the topic they are discussing.

Second Quarter: Students still go outside, but as the weather gets colder, and there isn't as much to study outside, the class transitions into the environmental part of their curriculum. This explores how our health, and the environments health is interconnected. Students will brainstorm possible solutions to environmental issues. This section is inspired by John Hunter. Hunter is a fourth grade teacher, who created a game he calls “The world peace game”. He puts all of the worlds problems on a 4 by 5 board and asks his fourth graders to come up with solutions for them. This type of innovative thinking from young children is a great way to view an issue in a new perspective. He addresses real world issues (ie: global warming, famine, poverty) and the children work collaboratively to avoid “the paths to power, and destruction and war”. This teaches them to think in a “long term, more consequential way” (Hunter). One of his fourth graders states “you're actually getting taught something and how to take care of the world”, because the issues addressed are prevalent in everyones lives (Hunter). The game cultivates conversation on how to address world issues, and discuss the actions the children take, the solutions and the consequences alike. Hunter says he, just like his students, learns in this game, “and so in this game, I've learned so much from it, but I would say that if only they could pick up a critical thinking tool or creative thinking tool

from this game and leverage something good for the world, they may save us all. If only” (Hunter).

Third Quarter: Students learn about nutrition and agricultural practices that are environmentally friendly such as agroecology- Linking ecology, culture, economics, and society to sustain agricultural production, healthy environments, and viable food and farming communities (Agroecology). Students look at food that is native to their region that can be grown in the region they live in. This prepares them for the garden they will plant in the fourth quarter.

Fourth Quarter: Students learn how to plant a garden. Since the garden will not be ready until later in the year, during July and August, the school creates a system where families can help garden. After school is out volunteer parents, teachers, community members would work in garden. Depending on the size of the garden, volunteers may or may not get a share of produce. Since the food is going to students, and raising aware, healthy people, the school is not obliged to share produce. The garden is a place to build community, learn technique, and, grow fresh produce. The school garden is inspired by Alice Waters's. Waters, a renowned chef who owns Chez Panisse in Berkeley California, began a program 15 years ago called the Edible School Yard. The program began at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley California. It got students out of the classroom and into nature, and taught them to grow, cook, and enjoy a product of their own making. Waters brought to light the educational benefit of incorporating gardening into the curriculum. Gardening teaches children ecology and gastronomy in a hands on environment. Nourishing food grown by group of students builds community, and teaches them healthy habits for eating. Fresh air helps open senses and prepare children for a day in the classroom (Lexicon of Sustainability). Deliberate actions taken to plant, grow, harvest, and prepare food shows children the value of food.

I can confidently say that my upbringing has had a huge impact on my attitude toward environmentalism, and my passion for cultivating a healthy lifestyle. For decades, educators, philosophers, authors, and parent's have struggled to find the best way to teach students. The question is, how do you spark a student's interest in important subjects? The answer is to put them in an environment that inspires creativity, not in front of a screen. Louie Schwartzberg caught a moment with a student that should inspire everyone to go outside. The student captured nature perfectly, “when I watch TV, it's just some shows that you just -- that are pretend, and when you explore, you get more imagination than you already had, and when you get more imagination, it makes you want to go deeper in so you can get more and see beautiful things, like the path, if it's a path, it could lead you to a beach, or something, and it could be beautiful” (Schwartzberg). This is what schools need to strive for, engagement in the place that is not only beautiful, but the home to creativity, and problem solving. In Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods*, he poses a question that is the key to our solutions, if we act upon it. Louv asks “what could our lives and our children's lives be like if our days and nights were as immersed in nature as they are in technology?” (Louv). Through my years since I graduated from eighth grade, I have thought about feeling sheltered compared to the children who attended public schools. I realize that I wasn't sheltered, I was learning about a whole new world of knowledge that was right in my backyard.

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