Nature’s Classroom
Why a Nature’s Classroom?

“Go outside and play” was yesterday’s mantra, but today’s children rarely hear those four little words. Do you remember climbing rocks & trees, rolling down hills, hiding in the grass, playing in the dirt, and jumping in leaves? Unfortunately, today’s children don’t have these memories. Instead of spending time hiking, swimming or telling stories around a campfire, they are more likely to attend computer or weight loss camps, and as a result, have come to think of nature as more of an abstraction than a reality. The future, however, is in the hands of our children, many of whom are more likely to view nature through the screen of a TV, rather than the netted screen of a camping tent.

The retreat indoors over the past few decades has many environmental advocates worried that children who grow up without memories of making mud pies, damming up water, or building forts might grow up to become adults for whom conserving the environment is not a priority.

Benefits of a Nature’s Classroom

Cracking open a milkweed pod to release the feathery seeds, watching a robin build its nest, discovering the diversity of life housed in a single tree... experiences like these help children to understand the interconnectedness and beauty of our world. A 2002 British study reported that 8 year olds could identify Pokemon characters more easily than they could name an “otter, beetle or oak tree.”

Today’s children are not spending enough time outdoors. Researchers have determined that each hour of TV watched per day by preschoolers increases by 10% the likelihood that they will develop concentration problems and other symptoms of attention deficit disorder by age 7.

Recent research indicates that many children are actually gaining weight during the summer, a time that used to be characterized by vigorous outdoor play. Direct exposure to nature can offer powerful therapy for such maladies as depression, obesity and attention deficit disorder. Ongoing research with substantially convincing evidence states that positive, appropriate experiences with nature bring profound benefits to children.

- Combination of body movement, building and nature improve visual-spatial skills
- If we teach children, even through play, we are teaching them to help the earth
- Natural playgrounds contribute to overall physical, cognitive and emotional development of children
- Environment-based education improves standardized test scores, grade point averages, and decision-making skills
- As a result of playing in natural outdoor environments, children score higher on tests for concentration and self-discipline, experience more diverse play, and exhibit less aggressive behavior
- Natural play environments help children develop greater problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills

Not only are nature’s classrooms beneficial to the children they serve, they also offer many financial benefits, making them perfect outdoor classrooms. The costs for natural playgrounds, including design, contract documents and construction costs are less than the cost for installing equipment that tries to replicate play opportunities that children have on natural playgrounds. Natural playgrounds incorporate the use of many natural elements such as boulders, rocks, sand, soil, wood, water and indigenous vegetation as integral parts of the play experience. Material costs can be much lower than traditional equipment. Often, the community will want
to help donate materials, labor and money, thus further reducing the costs. Not only do natural playgrounds cost less than traditional playgrounds, they offer far greater play value.

- They offer higher play value at lower costs
- They are less expensive than traditional equipment playgrounds
- They lower playground injuries, which cost the US over $8 billion annually
- They do not need to be replaced when safety regulations change
- As part of the ‘greening movement,’ they reduce costly environmental impacts while improving wildlife habitats, and being aesthetically pleasing

**Our Nature’s Classroom**

As an extension of our high, quality early childhood education program, our nature’s classroom would offset the sedentary effects of an indoor lifestyle that are already evident among young children. As the movement to reconnect children with nature is gaining momentum, we want to be on the forefront as a teaching lab school in allowing children to experience the natural world more deeply and find the joy of the great outdoors in the process.

Our plans include:

- Planned in various phases of development
- Diverse group of volunteers including students, staff, parents, faculty, and community members
- Ongoing activities designed to increase awareness and involvement through natural materials
- Aesthetically pleasing design plan for exploration, experimentation, and creative, imaginative play
- Becoming the first certified Nature Explore Classroom through the Arbor Day Foundation in Hillsborough County
- Future provisions for providing professional development training relating to nature education to outside agencies

Children enjoy building, creating and imagining; they will be instantly inspired when they have a positive connection with nature. They can start a melody with a giant marimba; create designs and mosaics with natural art materials; and build with blocks and wood cuttings of all shapes and sizes. Our waterfall feature will allow children to float feathers and leaves, build miniature dams, or make mud pies; they can create fanciful castles with giant fabrics in a tree house. Children can explore by climbing in and through giant logs, or build a fortress with rocks and tree limbs. Our nature’s classroom is an ideal place to provide young children with the textures, smells, beauty, and wonder of nature while improving important learning skills.

As the coordinator of the Dale Mabry Child Development Center, I am extremely excited about the possibility of our children benefitting from this project. I am always looking for new ways to increase parent-child programming. I believe this project will encourage parents to become more involved as they have opportunity to discover nature with their child. Research shows that the right spaces, components and activities benefit young children behaviorally, educationally, physically, socially and emotionally as they connect with nature. What a wonderful way to begin promoting an awareness of our environment to our youngest citizens, and connect children with the wonder of nature at an early age.