

# A Nature Pre-School Walk



## International Inspiration for Learning Outdoors

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## DEVELOPING ROUTINES: A NATURE PRE-SCHOOL WALK IN THE WOODS

This case study has been included in the outdoor learning exemplification because the new draft outcomes and experiences for the Early Stage in *A Curriculum for Excellence* clearly specify getting out and about beyond the designated outdoor area. This exemplar illustrates how one nursery uses the natural environment and developed routines which have resulted in a positive enjoyable experience for children and staff.



In Discovery Park, Seattle, a nature pre-school was set up in 2005 by a Montessori nursery teacher and a naturalist who wanted more to do! It is one of the most popular preschool programmes in the city for children aged three to five.

It is not an outdoor nursery in the sense of a forest school. There are two indoor rooms beside the park's visitor centre which are shared with an after school and holiday club. There is no secure designated outdoor area.

Yet the children are outside most of the time! At the start of each school year, a substantial amount of time is spent developing routines and boundaries. Every child knows to stay within sight of the adults who are with them. No child wanders off to the nearby visitor centre or into the surrounding woods.



The concrete seating wall forms one of the boundaries outside the classrooms. The children used the wall for walking along too. The big sticks in the photo were pulled down from the woods by several children working together. The bushes and visitor centre also provide a natural boundary.

Parents provide their children with suitable clothing in full knowledge that they will be outside year-round in all weathers. The biggest outdoor shop in Seattle sells its own make of waterproofs which are cheap and sturdy. This is why so many children are wearing yellow waterproof trousers in the photos!

The photo shows the indoor storage area for the children's outdoor clothes. As you can see, boots are stored in pairs on the top of plastic containers. There are 15 children in the session with 2 adults who run the pre-school.



Every day the children go for a walk. When I visited in April, the walk lasted almost 75 minutes. The children took no snack or drink with them. This happened beforehand. Kyla Saphir, the pre-school leader told me that it took about two months for the children to:

- Become proficient at taking on and off their outdoor gear independently
- Develop the stamina for a sustained walk
- Undertake a walk with no resources other than those they found or made on the way. Initially the children simply didn't know what to do.

During the walk it was interesting to observe the children and leaders in action. Kyla and her co-worker, Natalie, both had high levels of interaction with the children. They referred to seasonal changes and the names of animals and plants naturally as part of the play and discussions which took place. Songs, stories and rhymes were shared along the way as the children picked up sticks and showed me their favourite places.

This area was popular with the children because earlier in the year every child had planted a tree here. They would always stop by and check the trees if their walk took them nearby.

The staff had mobile phones to communicate with the visitor centre in the event of an emergency.





Many curriculum areas were covered through the spontaneous play the children undertook throughout the walk. Sticks, cones and fingers were used for mark making and creating pictures on the paths. Some children just like making trails by dragging the sticks along the ground.



The children's gross motor skills were generally well developed. This fallen down tree provided a natural climbing wall and a great view from the top!

All children were happy and absorbed. They were very comfortable in their surroundings and knew where to go and what to do. No child lagged behind or asked "Are we there yet?"

The children enjoyed the challenge of moving over different surfaces and levels. Obstacles in the paths were simply problems to overcome! Dens and nests were made by the children in one area which the children returned to each time they undertook a walk that passed by this place. This gave them the opportunity to develop their creations over time...or destroy them and rebuild!



The steps provided endless counting opportunities! Puddles were entertaining. Some children used their sticks as fishing rods. Others just liked walking through them and watching the splashing and rippling of the water.



As well as walks in the woods around the centre, the children are also taken to other places. Both adults are qualified minibus drivers and organise trips to the beach, pond and meadow habitats.

Without a doubt, persistence in developing safe routines outdoors is worthwhile. It was encouraging to be in a setting where the perceived fears and risks about taking children beyond the boundaries had been addressed by good-natured cooperation and communication between staff and parents.

This is happening in an American city where there is a more prevalent litigation culture than Scotland and a much greater range of weather conditions. Now there's a thought!

Further information can be found on the Discovery Park website <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/parkspaces/DiscoveryPark/preschool.htm>

### Thinking Points:

- 1) When planning topics within an Early Stage class, what opportunities are you providing for children to learn beyond the school or setting?
- 2) What are your current procedures and practice around taking young children beyond the setting?
- 3) What do you need to do in terms of working with parents and setting routines around going into your local neighbourhood?
- 4) What facilities in your local area exist which can be used to extend and enhance the children's experiences? What natural habitats exist? What services, organisations and businesses can be visited or used to develop children's understanding of people, place and environment?

This report was compiled by Juliet Robertson, Creative STAR Learning Company, after visiting a variety of schools in Seattle as part of her 2008 Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship. The Winston Churchill Trust operates Travelling Fellowships as a living memorial to Sir Winston Churchill. For more information visit [www.wcmt.org.uk](http://www.wcmt.org.uk) It was originally produced for the Forestry Commission Scotland who have given permission for this work to be published in this format.