



*Nature Explore is a collaborative project of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and Arbor Day Foundation*



## What are Nature Explore Classrooms?

**N**ature Explore Classrooms are dynamic, nature-based play and learning spaces. Nature Explore Design Consultations apply research-based, field-tested design principles to create these nature-rich outdoor spaces that can be located anywhere a school, child care center, park, or other community site might have a traditional playground. Nature Explore Classrooms enhance the physical environment and add natural beauty to the surrounding area.

## What is the Nature Explore Program?

### Connecting Children with Nature

**E**ducators and mental health professionals world-wide are becoming concerned that many of today's children are no longer able to spend unhurried hours exploring the natural world in the same ways that previous generations enjoyed. Research is showing that children need connections with the natural world as a regular part of their healthy growth and development. Disconnection from nature is leading to increases in problems such as childhood obesity, dislike and even fear (often media induced) of the outdoors, and increased reliance on behavior-regulating medications.

To answer the profound need for connecting young children with nature, the Arbor Day Foundation and the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation have collaborated to create the Nature Explore program. It provides educators, designers, and families with comprehensive resources to connect children with the natural world on a daily basis.

What makes Nature Explore effective? Outdoor-classroom design principles and resources are grounded in over a decade of research and field-testing by the Dimensions Foundation to help ensure developmentally appropriate benefits for children.

Nature Explore *Classrooms* are essential components of the program; a Nature Explore *Design Consultation* can help you successfully create one for your program.

## How do Nature Explore Classrooms support children's skill development?

Research from many sources provides evidence of decreased behavioral concerns and increased health benefits for children who spend regular time connecting with the natural world. Dimensions Foundation [research](#), based on direct observation of children's work over time in Nature Explore Classrooms, is documenting enhanced skill development in multiple areas as children learn with nature each day. The following information is a compilation of some of the important ways children are benefitting from their experiences in Nature Explore Classrooms.

### Science Skills

Science skills are a natural fit with outdoor classrooms. These skills include classifying objects into groups with common characteristics, predicting, experimenting, and drawing conclusions. Hands-on learning also occurs about natural cycles, seasons, environments, and how things live and grow. Children develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for the world around them, especially as they help care for living things.

### Close Observation Skills

Through regular contact with nature, children develop close observation skills such as noticing details, finding patterns, and recognizing shapes. These skills are foundational for later math, science and literacy learning.

### Language & Literacy Skills

Children's work in the natural world inspires them to learn new words, write signs for the garden, or create poetry. Experiences such as these are especially important for children who struggle with traditional methods of teaching reading and writing.

### Social Skills

Well-designed outdoor classrooms also offer endless open-ended possibilities for discovery. Children who are engaged and active are far more likely to exhibit positive behaviors and build stronger social skills. Children share ideas, negotiate, make decisions, decide on tasks, and problem-solve together in an outdoor classroom.



### Math Skills

The outdoor classroom allows children to incorporate math skills, like counting, predicting and estimating as they see how many pine cones can fit on a stump or determine how many sticks it takes to create a fort. As children explore measurement concepts such as length, area, perimeter and volume, these experiences lay the groundwork for later, higher math skills in subjects such as geometry.

### Visual-Spatial Skills

Visual-spatial skills become highly developed in outdoor classrooms. Visual-spatial skills give people the ability to negotiate well in space: to create and follow maps, or design and engineer buildings. These skills are developed as children climb, build, create...and look at the world from multiple perspectives.

### Music & Movement Skills

In music and movement areas children learn about sound, pitch, rhythm and tonality. Using a variety of musical instruments made from natural plant materials gives children a chance to experience nature and native cultures.

Outdoor music and movement areas provide a place in children's lives where they can make music and dance in unstructured ways, allowing for improvisation and creativity.

### Art Skills

Children create beautiful three-dimensional works of art from nature. And they can sharpen their observation skills by transforming three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional works of art.



## Why are Educator Workshops important?

Nature Explore [Educator Workshops](#) provide field-tested, age-appropriate methods for reconnecting children with nature on a daily basis. Educators who work in any way with children will gain practical strategies for becoming more effective at facilitating vital, meaningful experiences in the outdoors that will benefit young people throughout their lives.

Eleven engaging, hands-on workshops provide educators with comprehensive information on ways to support children's learning in well-designed outdoor spaces; techniques for reducing behavioral issues; and strategies for supporting each individual child's interests and needs. The most well-designed outdoor space will only be as effective as the educators who support children's interactions in that space.

Workshops are available regionally, or may be scheduled at individual sites. Detailed information on each of the following workshops is available on the [Nature Explore Web site](#).

- **Learning With Nature**
- **Using Your Outdoor Classroom**
- **We Dig Dirt**
- **The Importance of Visual-Spatial Learning**
- **Developing Observation Skills: Documentation**
- **The Arts and Nature**



- **The Wonders of Nature**
- **Choosing Effective Indoor and Outdoor Materials**
- **Nature-Inspired Indoor Environments**
- **Moving to Learn**
- **Joyful Movement**

## Why is Family Involvement important?



Families are a key part of what makes the comprehensive Nature Explore program so effective. When families enjoy nature with their children on a regular basis, children grow and flourish.

The Nature Explore [Families' Club](#) has been created as a resource for schools or other interested organizations to help connect families with the outdoors. The research-based, field-tested Families' Club kit (available free online) includes developmentally appropriate activities that engage families in exploring the natural world together. The kit features general information and customizable forms, a facilitator's guide with helpful hints, and nine visual, child-friendly activity sheets with facilitator notes specific to each one. The entire kit is now available in two easy-to-use formats to make starting a club as a parent, volunteer, or educator simple and effective.

## How do Design Consultations help you create a Nature Explore Classroom?

A Dimensions Foundation two-person team consisting of a specially trained landscape architect and a Dimensions educator can help create a concept plan for your Nature Explore Classroom anywhere in the nation.

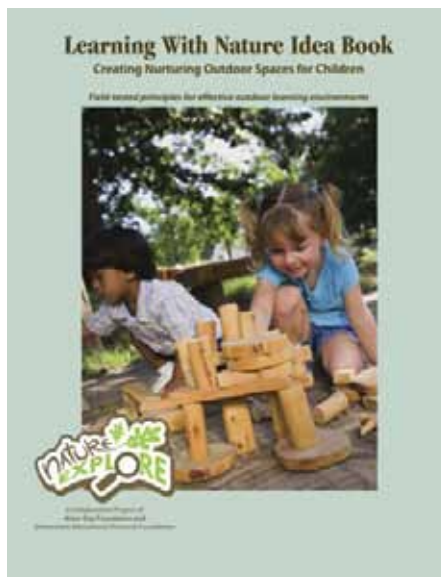
- Using an efficient, two-day process, the two-person team works at your site to develop a unique concept plan for your space based on the field-tested principles.
- The research-based information from the landscape architect and Dimensions educator helps you create a space that reduces behavioral concerns and supports the needs of all learners.
- Your concept plan will be designed to incorporate the interests, needs and resources of your staff and other stakeholders; respond to unique site features; climatic conditions; and respect regional context.

In hundreds of places this process has proven to be an efficient and effective way to help everyone in the organization quickly come to consensus. It can be even more effective if a Nature Explore educator workshop is held at the same time as the [design consultation](#). We'll work with you to find the most cost-effective way to meet your needs.



## Create a Concept Plan

The 10 Guiding Principles from the [Learning With Nature Idea Book](#) are based on years of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation's field-testing and research, and represent a well-rounded mix of experiences that can and should occur outdoors for children. They provide a solid contextual foundation for creating nurturing outdoor spaces for children and include key concepts from leading American Society of Landscape Architects members. While each specific classroom will vary in design, the guiding principles are applicable in all settings.



## How do you become a Certified Nature Explore Classroom?

The national Nature Explore [Classroom Certification Program](#) recognizes schools and other organizations that have made a commitment to providing outdoor classrooms and comprehensive programming to help children use the natural world as an integral part of learning. The following certification standards ensure the success and sustainability of these outdoor classrooms:

1. **Well-designed outdoor space:** Provide evidence that principles from the *Learning With Nature Idea Book* were used in the design of new spaces, or the redesign of existing spaces.
2. **Staff development:** Provide evidence that one or more staff members have attended a full-length Nature Explore Workshop.
3. **Family involvement:** Provide evidence that activities or materials designed to increase family awareness and involvement in nature education for children are provided regularly.

**To discuss a design consultation and/or workshop for your site, contact us at [info@natureexplore.org](mailto:info@natureexplore.org) or call 402.467.6112.**