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DISCOVERY CHILD CARE LAUNCHES FIRST LICENSED FOREST & NATURE SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN

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DISCOVERY CHILD CARE LAUNCHES SIMCOE COUNTY'S FIRST LICENSED FOREST & NATURE SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN

By: Andrea Hannen

This fall, long-time ADCO member Discovery Child Care in Barrie opened the first licensed forest and nature Kindergarten program in Simcoe County. There are only a handful of early learning forest schools available to Ontario families, but demand for this time-tested and holistic pedagogical approach is growing rapidly Canada-wide.

Internationally, forest schools began to appear in the 1950s. There are more than 700 of them in Germany alone. Generally speaking, the children attending a forest school spend at least half of each day outdoors. In many cases, the children are outdoors 80% to 90% of the time. Woodlands, greenspaces and other outdoor areas provide the settings for a forest school, but a key component is repeated access to the

same outdoor space, so the children can observe the natural cycles of the seasons and the local environment.

The pedagogical approach of forest schools is emergent, experiential, enquiry and play-based. It is designed to foster children's relationships with the natural world around them, with program staff and with the other children in the program. The benefits of this type of programming are many, including fewer student absences, better child health, reduced stress and increased patience, a spirit of self-reliance, and a high level of ecological literacy. The many commonalities between the pedagogical approach of forest schools and traditional Aboriginal approaches to education also create an opportunity for educators and schools to offer inclusive experiences in which all children can feel valued and comfortable.



Regular visits to the same nature area allow the children to truly appreciate simple pleasures such as wildflowers.

The activities that happen in a forest school vary, depending on the season, climate, landscape, animals that have visited the night before, trees that have blown down in the wind, and the kinds of provocations elicited by the educator. Forest school programming incorporates a wide variety of learning activities, facilitated by various forms of play, such as: symbolic play, creative play, exploratory play, rough and tumble play, fantasy play, dramatic play, social play and imaginative play. "Almost any kind of programming that we can do indoors, we can adapt for the outdoor environment," says Karen Eilersen, RECE, owner/operator of Discovery Child Care.

Eilersen has nearly completed the Forest School Practitioner certification, a process that takes considerable time and effort. It requires one to be a certified teacher or Early Childhood Educator and to complete a five-day intensive training session, eight months to a year of at-home course work, followed by a series of practice sessions in the forest. Forest School Practitioners are certified by Forest School Canada.



Learning how to overcome obstacles is just one of the many important lessons children learn from forest school programming.

While Forest School Canada is a relatively new organization (2012), it offers a wealth of online resources to help educators explore the forest school concept, understand the forest school curriculum, explain it to families, and if they wish, establish a forest school program.

Ensuring the children's safety and well-being requires a great deal of skill and planning on the part of the educators and owner/operators involved. Assessing, managing and communicating about potential areas of risk are among some of the most important skills required. Educators not only need to evaluate and manage any risks inherent in the outdoor area being used, as well as those associated with simply being outdoors for extended periods of time; they also need to be able to teach the children how to identify and manage risks and make reasonable calculations about the benefits and risks of particular activities.

Running a successful forest school program also involves significant communication and collaboration with parents. Forest School Canada's book: *Forest and Nature School in Canada: A Head, Heart and Hands Approach to Outdoor Learning* recommends regular engagement with parents, so they can experience for themselves the outdoor learning environment and activities their children do. This helps parents better



Shared outdoor adventures mean the children form strong bonds with one another.

understand what kinds of outdoor clothing will be needed, what the children's day-to-day activities are like and the depth of the learning that takes place.

The Discovery Forest School offers Barrie-area families a legitimate and licensed alternative to regular kindergarten. It follows the Ontario Early Learning Framework, Continuum of Development, so despite its many non-traditional elements, it ensures children are well-prepared for grade one. Discovery's Forest School program, which runs daily from nine until noon, is taught by two Level 3 certified Forest School Practitioners and two classroom teachers. The program maintains a

one-to-four teacher/child ratio while in the forest and a one-to-eight teacher/child ratio while in the indoor/outdoor classroom.

Discovery's other two programs, located on Harvie Road and on Big Bay Point, provide children in other age groups with environmentally aware programming and lots of time outside, using enhanced outdoor learning spaces rather than completely natural forest spaces.

Eilersen and her husband Chris have offered environmentally-conscious child care programming for many years. In 2012, created Canada's first Nature Explore outdoor classroom, certified by the Arbour Day Foundation. Creating and launching Discovery Forest School was a natural extension of the couple's strong belief in the benefits of bringing children and nature together.

"We believe that being outdoors in beautiful, natural environments is an essential experience for all children," says Eilersen. "Research continues to show that nature reduces stress, increases attention span and fosters healthy brain development. It is critical to a child's health and to the healthy development of the whole child. Here, children are given the opportunity to interact daily with materials found in nature and in the process become thoughtful stewards of the earth we share."



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