

Reconnecting Children with the Natural World

A Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom

Sample Grant Proposal

I. Request

(Name of organization) requests a grant of \$_____ (specify amount) to improve the lives of children in _____ (locations served) by creating a Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom at our program site _____ (address).

II. Statement of Need

Researchers note that, for most of human existence, children have spent much of their childhood in outdoor environments where they interacted with nature regularly. Today, we find that youth are less connected with nature than ever before, and with significant consequences to their understanding of the world and their intellectual and developmental well-being. In fact, research by R.A. Wilson (1994) and D.A. Simmons (1994), based on personal interviews with groups of children varying in age from preschool to age nine, found that the attitudes children expressed towards various aspects of the natural environment – such as rain, wildflowers, trees, and birds – included more expressions of fear and dislike than appreciation, caring or enjoyment.

A multitude of studies show that children are spending much more time in front of a screen than they spend exploring the world outside. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, a typical child spends an average of more than 38 hours a week – nearly five and a half hours a day – consuming media outside of school. Thus, the culture of childhood that played outside is gone, and children's everyday life has shifted to the indoors (Hart 1999, Moore 2004). Two main issues arise from this trend:

- Children miss out on crucial physical activity and nature-related learning that develops observation and problem-solving skills, science and math abilities, imagination, creativity, and a sense of wonder that is the basis for lifelong learning.
- Children fail to make personal connections that instill appreciation and understanding of the natural world – both necessary to creating the next generation of tree planters and environmental stewards.

Additional studies show convincing evidence that positive, appropriate experiences with nature bring significant benefits to children. Research tells us that these experiences - interactions that cannot be reproduced indoors, on a computer, or on video – have multiple positive effects on the physical and psychological well-being of children, as well as on development of their cognitive skills.

- Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), when provided appropriate contact with nature, show an improvement in their ability to concentrate (Taylor 2001).
- Children who regularly have positive personal experiences with the natural world show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility (Grahm 1997, Fjortoft 2001).
- Appropriate interactions with nature help children develop powers of observation and creativity (Crain 2001).
- The development of imagination and a sense of wonder have been positively linked to children's early, appropriate experiences with the natural world (Cobb 1997). A sense of wonder is an important motivator for life-long learning (Wilson 1997).

In addition, outdoor experiences and interaction with nature help children understand the structure, inter-connectedness and beauty of the world. Among various studies supporting this connection, a cross-cultural research study by J.A. Palmer (1993) found that the single most important factor in developing personal concern for the environment was positive experiences in the outdoors during childhood.

III. Project Description

Goal: The goal of this project is to incorporate nature as an integral, joyful part of children's daily learning by building a Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom at (location)_____.

Nature Explore is a national nonprofit program of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, which works collaboratively with a network of organizations throughout the nation. Based upon research being carried out since 1998, Nature Explore connects children with nature on a daily basis by providing:

1. Research-based outdoor classroom designs for schools and other organizations,
2. Educational workshops on supporting and assessing nature-based learning,
3. Field-tested educational resources that support learning with nature.

Our research shows that nature offers one of the best classrooms for whole-child learning. Learning in nature allows a child to engage all of his or her senses, including physical movement. Children who have regular contact with nature become deeper learners and experience a more complete whole-person development. Children who grow up without regular contact with nature are deprived of this opportunity to grow and learn to their fullest ability. Since 2006, Nature Explore has provided outdoor classroom design services for more than 450 K-6 schools, early childhood education programs, arboretums, nature centers, children's museums, and other child-serving organizations across the United States.

Sites with Nature Explore Classrooms often begin to report decreases in behavioral problems as children’s sense of wonder and comfort with nature flourishes. And with children’s heightened connection with nature, families are engaging in more outdoor activities. As a result of these findings, some states are incorporating nature education into early learning guidelines. In addition, The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education has drafted an international position paper on the importance of connecting children with nature. Because the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom model includes research-based outdoor classroom design, staff training and parent involvement, we believe this program will be the most effective and impactful on the children and families we serve.

Each Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom will become part of a network of organizations committed to bringing more nature experiences to children’s daily lives. Field-tested designs and classroom components include:

- Areas for playing, climbing, and building
- Materials featuring the textures, smells, beauty, and wonder of nature
- Activities to develop children’s observation skills, creativity and innovate thinking

IV. Objectives and Timeline

Objectives	Timeline
1. Outdoor Classroom Design Consultation	
2. Outdoor Classroom Construction	
3. Outdoor Classroom Planting	
4. Nature Explore Workshops (teacher training)	
5. Nature Explore Families Club	
6. Nature Explore Certification	

V. Impact

Children who spend time in well-designed Nature Explore Classrooms with nurturing adults develop valuable skills across all learning domains (Miller 2007).

The impact of Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms is significant. These learning spaces:

- Inspire the next generation of tree planters and environmental stewards
- Create new experiential learning opportunities for children to enhance important observation and problem-solving skills
- Provide places for stimulating, hands-on, spontaneous outdoor play
- Positively influence children, families, and communities

Children who play in nature gain the following:

- Enhanced observation skills
- Improved fine motor skills
- Improved concentration (especially beneficial for children with ADHD)
- Greater recovery from cognitive fatigue
- Reduced incidence of nearsightedness and need for eye glasses
- Improved academic performance in reading, writing, math, science
- Develop an affinity for nature

This project will serve _____ (insert number of people who will use the outdoor classroom annually) each year, ranging in age from _____ (insert age ranges served by your organization).

VI. Evaluation Plan

The Nature Explore Classroom Certification Program is a national initiative that 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. Grounded in research and field-testing, this widespread initiative is sponsored by Dimensions Educational Research Foundation in collaboration with environmental, educational, design and health organizations.

In the process of initial certification, the outdoor classroom will be evaluated for the following criteria:

1. **Well-designed outdoor space:** Has the classroom been designed according to the 10 guiding principles of Nature Explore?
2. **Staff development:** Have staff members attended a full-length Nature Explore Workshop?
3. **Family involvement:** Have activities or materials designed to increase family awareness and involvement in nature education been provided regularly over a period of time?

Consider tracking one or more of the following about your program:

1. Compare minutes per day spent outdoors before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.
2. Survey children's, parents', and/or teachers' attitudes toward nature before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.
3. Track the number of daily behavior-related disruptions to the classroom routine before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.

4. For non-classroom based facilities, track use of the space in terms of numbers of adults and children who use the current outdoor space before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.
5. For non-classroom based facilities, track use of the space in terms of the average length of time children and adults spend in the current outdoor space before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.
6. For non-classroom based facilities, track the number of children/youth visitors before and after the implementation of the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom.
7. Record the skills children are using in the outdoor classroom (such as social problem-solving, large motor, fine motor, close observation, understanding quantities, estimation, cause and effect, etc.), which support whole child learning.
8. Use a qualitative approach to collect rich anecdotal stories of use, attitude and behaviors.

VII. Key Personnel

We will be consulting on the planning and design of our outdoor classroom with nationally recognized experts in this field from Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, a working collaboratively with other organizations throughout the nation.

The Nature Explore program is based on years of research and field-testing on how science, math and literacy learning can be enhanced by the addition of outdoor spaces. Nature Explore involves an interdisciplinary team of consultants including educators, scientists, architects, landscape architects, neuropsychologists, mathematicians, kinesthetic specialists, parent educators and qualitative and quantitative researchers from across the United States. They have a team of landscape architects trained in design principles for creating field-tested, developmentally appropriate outdoor learning spaces for young children.

VIII. Budget

The budget for the Nature Explore Classroom is as follows:

Expense	Description	Cost*
Site Consultation	Two-day on-site design consultation with landscape architect and educational trainer to create a concept plan for the Nature Explore Classroom.	
Staff Training and Support	Training for ____ (number) staff members (number) of workshops.	

Site Preparation	Site preparation as needed- removal of concrete, dirt moving to create paths and berms designating classroom spaces	
Plants and Landscape Materials	For purchasing plant materials and landscaping elements	
Educational Resources	For purchasing nature-based educational materials and equipment	
Recognition & Signage	Materials and signage for recognition as a Nature Explore Classroom site	
Nature Explore Club Educator's Edition	Six read-aloud stories; activities and explorer's tools for ten students; educator ideas for integrating nature activities into indoor and outdoor classrooms	
	TOTAL	

**Through the process of your design consultation, Nature Explore will provide tools to help you determine costs for each budget item.*

IX. Applicant Organization

Include information about your organization including:

- *Brief history*
- *Mission and purpose of organization*
- *Current programs*
- *Number of people served*
- *Description of people served (ages, income ranges, ethnic backgrounds, etc.)*
- *Staff leadership*
- *Annual operating budget*
- *Non-profit 501(c)3 status*
- *Location*

X. Summary

We look forward to creating a Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom at _____ (location(s) with support from _____ (grant funding organization/foundation). This outdoor classroom will impact _____ (estimate number, i.e. hundreds or thousands) of children over the ensuing years. And

this classroom will also serve as a demonstration to inspire other schools and programs to integrate nature into children's daily learning. Together, we can help children develop strong connections with nature that will make a difference in their learning and in their lives for years to come.