

A day in a Nature Kindergarten

Written by Dr. Enid Elliot

It is 8:45 and the children have gathered to head off to the woods. The teacher is there and taking note of who is present, the early childhood educator is checking in with children making sure everyone has boots and rain gear as it has been raining and might start again. One parent is going to come with the group and is well dressed for the weather. This parent started coming early in September as she had a child who was feeling uncertain about leaving her mother. The child is comfortable now but the mother continues to come one day a week which has been a wonderful addition to the group. It is not too cold, about 8 degrees.

Everyone has arrived and so they head to the gate and into the Royal Roads woods. This is a familiar path that they have been walking for a month now. Four boys run ahead and then run back towards the group, visually checking in. The children understand that they must be able to see the adults or hear them nearby. The teacher is in front with five children, walking and talking about what they are seeing and about information that the children want to share with her/him. They are all intent on their discussion as they walk. A group of four children follow and they have collected sticks, which they are discussing as one drags a stick behind her, another is using the stick to point into the woods and two other children are brandishing them. A close look at the brandishing shows that the brandishing is a heroic gesture and not an aggressive one. Another child follows closely behind watching but not engaged in the group. A group of four girls follow; one has a *my little pony* and the girls are discussing ponies and which ones they like. The early childhood educator is walking with them, listening and ready to enter conversation about ponies and horses, perhaps to connect the conversation to where real horses and ponies live, would they like the woods and who has ridden a pony. At the end is the parent with three children who are moving slowly and have not yet found their rhythm.

One boy uses his stick to poke into a hole found by the trail. Other children find sticks or watch him as he pokes into the hole. "Here is another hole!" shouts a girl a little further down the path. Some children move there to see that hole. Sticks and holes have captured the imagination of about nine children now with three or four onlookers. There are investigations occurring on both sides of the path. The horse and pony group has joined in and is listening carefully. The educator wonders aloud if the holes might be an animal's home and might not want to be disrupted. The group turns to hear more and think about that. They continue walking and share stories of animal homes that they know about, entertaining some fanciful ideas.

Meanwhile the runners have joined the group who has been walking with the teacher, and are taking a close look at a spider's web. One of the runners is still jogging in place and has noticed another web and shouts for everyone to come and see this web. They compare the webs and notice they are different. The teacher wonders if they can find more webs.

The other group, who is still talking about animal homes, hears a woodpecker and wonder if they can find where the bird is. The educator tells them they will have to be quiet and follow the sound. They become quiet, seeing a pileated woodpecker high in a dead tree, and they stop to watch in silence.

The educator mentions to the children, as they quietly leave the spot where they have been watching, that the woodpecker is finding insects to eat. Sometimes, birds use sticks to fish insects out of holes in the trees—they use sticks as tools. A new idea for the children to think about and they look at their sticks in a new light.

At this point, they all arrive at the gathering spot. The parent along with the three children, who have been quietly chatting with her, arrives; they all gather to discuss their walks and talks. Spider webs and animal homes seem to dominate the discussion. As they sit and share their findings, there are about six children who are drawing or tapping the ground with their sticks. The group divides into two with one group

discussing spiders and webs and the other discussing animal homes. The teacher has a book about insects in her backpack that they consult to see if it can tell them more about spiders. They locate what spiders they are most likely to see in this area. The teacher gets out some string and some rope and they discuss creating their own spider webs. Some children take the string and go off to create spider webs.

The educator wonders if other children would like to use the rope and perhaps find more sticks and create some different types of homes. They look to see if there are any other clues about what animals live there...they think about tracks or fur caught on a branch. The educator suggests that they can think about the characteristics of this place and then when they are back in the classroom they can look to see what animals live in this area and which ones might live in the woods. Another group goes off with cameras to document some of the holes to see if they might be animal homes they also decide to take photos of holes in the trees and investigate what they might be.

Meanwhile the teacher and educator have been taking notes--which child is taking the lead for animal homes, which child articulates the group's interests, who asks questions and wonders in an original way, which children are engaged in the discussion, which children are figuring out the process of using the string to create spider webs—who can tie the string, who sees how to create the different segments...they will use these observations for assessment, as well as future planning. They will check in at lunch time to share ideas how to extend the morning interests and learning. The teacher and educator work in partnership to develop the curriculum with the children and to provide invitations to move forward or even sideways!

The educator has been taking photos and has asked the parent to take some photos as well of the children looking for holes. The teacher has managed to take a few spider web pictures that can be down loaded into the computer when they get back to the classroom for them all to look at and see if they can learn from some close looks at the webs they have found. The photos they have taken will be used later for assessment of the children's participation as well as reminders of some of the individual children's

inputs and interests. The pictures are shared with the parents at the end of the week when the teacher or educator works with a small group of children that varies each week to create a small newsletter that goes home to parents.

The morning is full of children thinking and planning around spider webs, animal homes and creating structures for the homes. Three children have drifted off to play a game of explorer and are assigning roles and planning the dialogue. The children remind each other what they did last week in the explorer game and how they will carry on from there. They too are creating a home or shelter for their play.

Eventually the children gather for snack and they report on their morning. The spider web children talk about their efforts to try and create webs with string. One of the webs was quite successful and is still intact. The others were less successful and the children wondered what had gone wrong and being a bit silly (to an adult). The animal homes group had some fantastic ideas about animals that might live in some of the holes. The educator has been writing their ideas down so they can write and draw about it in the classroom—perhaps make a mural of animal homes, holes and who might live in them, including the fantastical ones. The group taking the pictures has taken pictures of holes, gullies and then they started to take pictures of holes in the trees and wonder--- Who made those holes? Are the holes all from the woodpecker? Does anyone live in them?

Heading back for lunch the group walks together quietly with small conversations happening here and there. The parent says good bye and hands over her camera so the photos can be downloaded. Back in the classroom the children eat their lunch and head outside to play in the playground. In the afternoon they listen to a story that the teacher has been reading, *Charlotte's web*. Was this the impetus for noticing spider webs?

A group of children draw the spider webs and with the teacher look up on-line more about spiders and spider webs. They decide to take some drawing pads with them tomorrow to draw the spider webs and investigate more carefully whether the forest

has different spiders or are they all the same spider. They now know what type of spiders might live in that part of the forest.

Another group is thinking about animal homes and shelters. The educator works with them to collect ideas and suggest tasks. A couple of children are drawing the type of shelter they might like to build for themselves while others are thinking of the animals they might see and where they might live. They start to construct an animal home incorporating elements that they have read about with the educator.

“The purpose of full day Kindergarten is to enhance children’s overall development — not to rush them into academics at an earlier age.”

Full day kindergarten program guide also goes on to say that full day kindergarten provides more time for children to

- engage in developmentally and culturally appropriate experiences that foster their learning and development in all areas
- learn through exploration and play, indoors and outdoors
- experience opportunities that foster their social-emotional learning, self-regulation, and positive relationships with teachers and peers
- engage in enriched experiences that facilitate conceptual, cognitive, and language growth, and foster inquiry
- learn about their local communities and cultures, and the natural environments in which they live
- participate in learning activities that extend beyond the school, such as neighbourhood and nature walks, and visiting the local library.

The extended day provides teachers with increased opportunities to support children’s learning through

- interacting with children individually and in small groups, including facilitating their play
- providing children with individual attention and support for learning
- providing deeper exploration of topics related both to the curriculum based on children’s interests
- conducting authentic, developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment
- communicating with children’s families and communities.

We see children fully engaged in activities that have them physically active. They are using literacy skills as they look at the books that the teacher and educator supply to identify spiders and animal homes (English PLO B1, B7). Learning to discern the shapes of holes in the ground

and trees they learn to “read” signs of the world around them (science PLO). Thinking about animal homes they begin to understand they share this place with other living creatures and they lead lives centered around a home. As they make the webs they must begin to understand about distances (math PLO) between branches and how much rope/string will fit.

Communicating with each other and with the teacher and educator they learn to “express themselves, ask for assistance and exchange ideas” (English PLO A1). Learning about the world around them (science PLO) and working as a group sharing ideas, etc (English and Social Studies PLO) are happening on this morning as they talk, share information and learn to work together. The teacher and educator working together in partnership and with other community members who come in to share information and stories will also provide a model of creating a community of learners....and there are many more PLO’s that are covered, as well as, some not thought of yet!

Early Learning Framework---fills many of the learning goals outlined here....such as—(to name just a few)

- explore the world using their bodies and all their senses
- actively explore, think and reason
- develop a sense of wonder for natural environments
- express a zest for living and learning
- understand their own actions may affect nature and the environment
- explore and learn about family, community and the wider world

Looking at the principles of the ELF our NK believes that children have an innate desire to learn and we hope to support and enhance that desire. Since families are the primary caregivers and the first teachers of their children we hope to include them in our journey with the children. Believing that “play is vital to children’s healthy development and learning” we have ample and unstructured time for play. While this is unstructured time for the children it provides the educator and teacher with opportunities to interact with the children extending their interests and creating “consistent, responsive and nurturing relationships”, as well as to observe children’s understandings of the world and their developing abilities.