

Taking the classroom *outside*

by NORM BLASEG

At Redwood Acres Public School, kindergarten students spend time daily in the trampoline forest behind their school. The children call it that because the vast expanse reminds them of a trampoline, a free-flowing space where they can run and roam.

All kindergarten students in Rainbow Schools receive one hour of daily outdoor instruction, an important component of the curriculum for four and five year olds. As children explore, they stretch their

As children explore outside, they stretch imaginations, while nurturing their abilities in an environment that is rich and complex.

imaginations and nurture their abilities in a learning environment that is both rich and complex.

"In kindergarten, we focus extensively on the whole child," says superintendent of schools Lesleigh Dye.

"Learning in an

outdoor setting helps children grow cognitively, emotionally, socially and physically, while creating happy memories that connect them to their experiences in and with nature."

The great outdoors provides an open-ended space for learning in which each child responds differently. The outdoor environment acts as another teacher, inviting children to wander and wonder.

As children play and explore, their curiosity grows. They question and form theories about the world around them. This fosters the development of strong problem solving, collaboration, and communication skills.

While outdoors, educators follow the children's lead and document their interests.

"Oftentimes, outdoor learning acts as a spark for the instruction that takes place indoors," says Dye. "Developing a connection between indoor and outdoor learning supports choice and challenges children to dig deeper. It enables educators to personalize instruction and evaluation, while children test their views, ideas and theories."



She adds: "In kindergarten, a strong emphasis is placed on the relationships between all aspects of learning. Nothing is explored in isolation."

Time spent outdoors benefits children in many ways. While the beauty and majesty of nature is celebrated, students learn the importance of conservation and environmental protection. More importantly, they gain the building blocks for more advanced learning that will take place in years to come.

"The more children immerse themselves in the natural world, the more we come to appreciate the respect, concern and empathy they have for the outdoors," says Dye. "We are creating citizens who care about the environment and who want to make a contribution to the world in which they live. We are also instilling in students values and skills that will last a lifetime."

Norm Blaseg is the director of education for the Rainbow District School Board.

Parents should encourage active kids

Take it outside. Whether in your backyard, a local trail or a neighbourhood park, open spaces provide wonderful places to look, listen and learn. Say hello to everything that's alive and let your imaginations soar.