

## Nature Based Education at Educare Central Maine

Valuing learning in nature has always been important to us at Educare Central Maine; however, since reopening in mid-May in the middle of the pandemic, the importance of maximizing our utilization of the outdoor environment only increased. While we are fortunate to have such an expansive and intentional outdoor environment, until reopening during COVID-19, many of our staff had been typically utilizing the outdoors for physical movement and play. With the knowledge that being outdoors as much as possible would only increase our ability to keep children and staff safe, healthy, and learning, our staff supported the notion of spending the majority of the school day outdoors but were looking for increased support in knowing exactly how to do that and also how to maximize their time with children in nature.



Our ongoing relationship with a Nature Based Consultant has been a critical piece in assuring that our staff felt confident and competent in facilitating learning in nature with our children. Since our consultant was not able to come and join us in person, we shifted her support to a virtual platform. Her direct contact and support given to our teachers has been a tiered process. We started to facilitate conversations between the consultant and our teachers by splitting our age groups (infant/toddler and preschool). She met monthly with the Lead Teachers in each age group virtually to open a conversation about the joys and challenges they were facing in spending an 8-10 hour day outdoors with children. After each virtual session, she would debrief with our School Director and Education Supervisor. She was able to give our teachers suggestions, answer questions and offer reflective prompts prior to each session.

After the monthly age group sessions were complete, feedback from both our staff and our consultant concluded that staff had been implementing her suggestions and their confidence in facilitating nature-based learning had grown tremendously. Our staff were leading children through meal times and rest times all taking place outdoors, along with intentionally planning meaningful curriculum that aligned with child goals that could be supported outdoors. One drawback from the larger age-group sessions with the consultant and staff was that facilitating a large group discussion virtually sometimes led to quieter staff not feeling confident in being as vocal as we would hope. She also observed that as time went on, the needs and questions our staff had were becoming more specific to their individual classrooms and children. We then shifted her support and had her devote time to meet with each of our classroom teams separately. She would send webinars and reflective prompts ahead of their scheduled meeting in order to make the most of





their time together. This platform change led to her being able to provide support to every staff member, not just lead teachers, and also to support each classroom while they worked through their own individual challenges as well as celebrate the tremendous success they each experienced.

Some of the most common topics that the consultant supported our classroom staff through were: shifting the demands of curriculum plans from an inside classroom environment to an outdoor one, safety measures and concerns for staff and children, material and gear needs, being able to safely hold mealtimes and rest times outdoors, how to engage infants and toddlers in nature, and more.

The photos throughout this report highlight the successes of the ways our consultant was able to support teachers to shift their thinking and the amazing outdoor learning opportunities that children and staff were able to experience because of it!

### **KVCC Discovery Groups**

Kennebec Valley Community Action Program and Kennebec Valley Community College (KVCC) collaborates together to offer playgroups on the college campus 3 times a week. The playgroups focus on STEAM, outdoor play, literacy and family interaction.

Due to COVID, the playgroups were moved to a virtual format. The Discovery playgroup teacher facilitated Facebook Live sessions with families and children. She incorporated scavenger hunts and the use of puppets, songs and stories as a way to engage with children and families. When face-face connections were allowed, the playgroups resumed outside on the college's natural playground with small numbers at a time.

In addition, KVCC Early Childhood practicum students continue to utilize the playgroup environment as a field placement site. In this model, the Discovery playgroup teacher acts as mentor and leader, guiding students in best practices and the importance and benefits of outdoor play and family engagement. This carries over to the Educare outdoor environment for practicum students as well.



### **Maine Roads to Quality Training & Guidebook for Outdoor Play Environments**

Five of the six online training modules are written and MRTQ is creating the digital interface in January, to be reviewed by Educare staff in February. The print/PDF version is being formatted by a graphic designer, to be completed in spring and piloted by Educare staff in summer.