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# What If... ?

by Diann Gano

“WHAT  
IF WE  
ACTUALLY  
TRIED A YEAR  
OF LEARNING  
IN OUTDOOR  
ENVIRONMENTS”

**W**hat if “distance learning” meant learning from a distance of at least six feet from all adults? Or better yet, sixty! What if the “summer slide” was actually a slide? A tall, scary, risk-taking slide that a child creates from a tree limb without the help of an adult? What if our children actually learned through their own movements and played outdoors and followed their own interests, without a curriculum or a distance learning plan for the entire day? If every cloud has a silver lining, is the silver lining of the coronavirus the shutdown of schools and over-scheduled family time?

What if the coronavirus was the awakening in education that the United States has been looking for? Is the silver lining the chance to re-invent our children’s education? What if we gave our children the chance to play in the sunshine, discover their surroundings, and become independent, responsible learners who never wish to return to the education they cur-

rently know? What if we trusted them to figure out problems, follow their interests and investigate the unknowns that intrigue them? What if we used this time to level the playing field for all our children?

Being educated is to learn who you are and what you love to do, to solve your own problems and to try new adventures. Is this the opportunity that families and children have been looking for? To discover freedom from the “direct learning” that a child’s brain may not be developmentally ready to comprehend? Could we let them forge their own trail of education at their own pace? Could we allow them to choose books on nests that are the same as the nest outside their window? Could they duplicate that nest with clay or paints, or in the woods with branches big enough to climb in? Can we all step back and just breathe?

We do not need to worry about our children falling behind. When children are busy discovering and solving real life problems, they learn in ways that make sense and are remembered in a deeper and more relevant way. When children are free from adult-led activities, they have opportunities to discover and engage in endeavors they seek out on their own. They discover their passions! Could we possibly give ourselves and our children time to slow down long enough to discover our own passions? Could that be the most wonderful of gifts in the midst of this horrific pandemic?

This gift of time has been given to us. Lots and lots of time. We have time to walk in the woods, build a fort, help our neighbors, throw rocks in the lake, plant a garden and then bake a pizza from scratch. Time to take risks and take advantage of failure. Time to use persistence to accomplish our goals. We have a chance to build the confidence and independence that many of us can’t find in an office or a classroom. We have time to create and structure our days. We have time to re-invent what education looks like in America.



Diann Gano, M.Ed. opened her family child care program, Under the Ginkgo Tree Nature School, in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1986. The children in her program spend the majority of their days outdoors in nature. She has long believed that the earth gives us what we need to learn and that nature is the perfect environment for young brains to grow and learn in every day. Gano presents at the local, state and national levels on topics ranging from indoor and outdoor learning

environments to math and science education In 2016, Gano was

honored as a recipient of First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move Child Care Innovator Award.

Education does not look like a child in tears, fighting with an adult to finish the homework that a teacher had to re-invent so she could take attendance online. It does not look like the educator, also in tears, who knows this system is so terribly broken, who recognizes the divide economically, digitally and politically. It does not look like the parent of a first grader, at the end of their patience, struggling with a child who is fidgeting to sit in a chair and finish an assignment about the 15th century spice routes, when the Mississippi River runs lazily only four blocks from their home.

This is what education in America looks like today. What if we could change that?

What if we actually tried a year of learning in outdoor environments? What if we invited the neighbors and grandparents and families to share their expertise with our young learners? What if we used this time to create wonderful places of learning in empty lots or ravines or school yards? What if we spent the majority of our days outdoors when the weather cooperated? What if our preschoolers spent most of their days in sunshine and play? What if they ate and napped outdoors? What if our children could name local birds by their songs and a tree by its bark? What if they counted stones or shells instead of plastic bears?

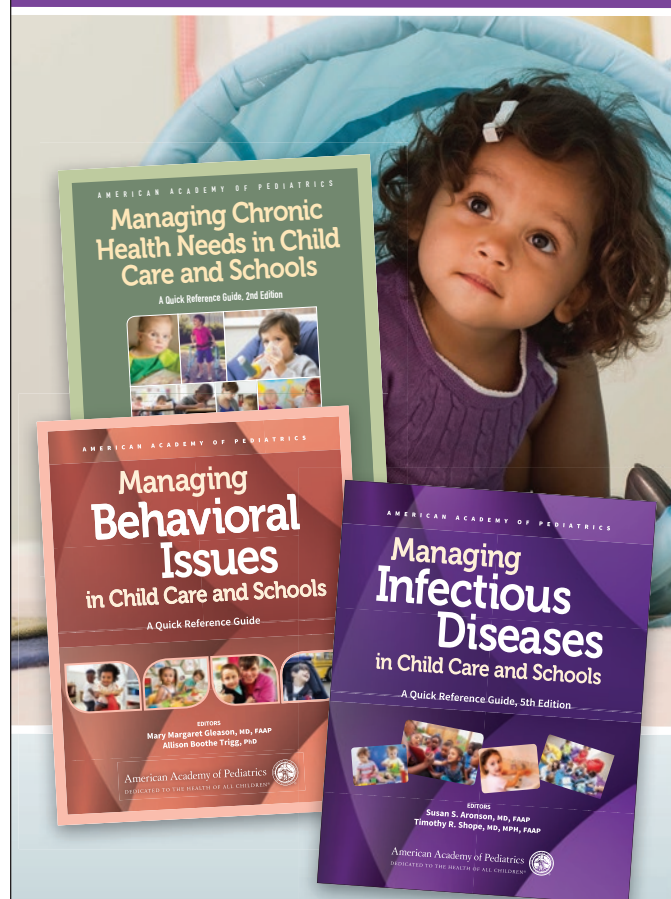
What if we use this time to level the playing field by letting our children play in a field? A playing field where the child dictates their own education, dreams and passions? What if we were able to give all children the same opportunities? What if we took this opportunity to make that happen for our next generation of leaders?

Will we, as adults, allow this generation of children the freedom to just be children? Will we fight for restructuring what education looks like and who gets the privilege of the best resources? What can we do with this time to change what isn't working? What good can we bring forward from so many sacrifices and so many broken hearts and dreams? What if we make really big changes during this life-changing time? What if we allowed ourselves to dream of a new style of education that slowed down the pace, found space in nature, and allowed children to be free to learn what intrigues them at the moment?

What if...?

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