



Photos by Diann Gano







# Under the Ginkgo Tree

## How One Family Child Care Provider Created a Magical, Natural Play Space for her Young Learners

by Diann Gano

“Can we sleep outside today? Please, can we sleep outside? Can we?”

It is early March, and jumping up and down before me, on the first sunny, 50-degree day in Illinois, are a group of preschoolers, giddy at the thought of trading in months of snow pants, boots and mittens and returning to hours under the sun. The success of outdoor naps was more than a happy memory, it had become a part of our routine.

When the pandemic struck a year ago, my family child care, Under the



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.

Ginkgo Tree Nature School, needed to do what many in the early childhood community found themselves doing: adapt, re-invent and take risks. Suddenly, all these skills that we hope to pass on to the children in our care became the skills early educators were using to meet the needs of our learning communities.

Under the Ginkgo Tree first opened its doors in 1986. It was a career choice that was made easy when I needed an income and childcare at the same time. The children at my school spent long periods of time outdoors with their friends, developing social and emotional skills, practicing risk taking and divergent thinking, and collaborating through play. My program has re-invented itself time and time again. As I learn and grow as a professional, so does my child care program.

We are currently entering our eleventh year as a Nature Explore Certified Outdoor Classroom. Before discovering Nature Explore, we were already

a program that spent the majority of our days outdoors, whenever we could. From our earliest days, nature has always been a large part of not only the philosophy and mission statement of our program, but of our lives. We eat the majority of our meals outdoors at the picnic table. We often move potty chairs outdoors, in order to minimize disruptions of the deep play that nature presents us with.

### Igniting Joy

Creating new routines and new outdoor learning spaces re-ignites a joy in teaching for me, which I crave. Having an environment that is safe, nurturing and stimulating, designed to facilitate social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth and development puts me in my happy place. When we made the shift from being outdoors to becoming a Nature Explore Certified Outdoor Classroom, I understood the possibilities of creating more intentional and focused



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learning spaces. I knew I was taking a risk, introducing nature-based learning as a curriculum. I knew I had to get parents to buy into the learning that was happening.

What does academic development through a nature-based approach look like? Would their children be ready for kindergarten if all they do is play? It was important to me, as an early childhood educator, that I shared research and documented the children's learning for their parents. We engaged in daily conversations about brain development, and how natural materials are full of math and science foundations. I sent photos documenting the early learning standards children were meeting. As research proves, self-directed time outdoors strongly contributes to the development of higher-level thinking skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten and beyond. As young children explore and engage in the natural environment, not only do they understand their bodies better, but they learn how to think critically, appropriately assess risk, problem solve, and develop social and emotional competencies.

### Stumps and Loose Parts

Stumps were the very first piece of nature that I brought into our play space. The children immediately gravitated to them. Within weeks, I noticed how their balance had improved and new relationships had formed. I saw the changes these simple tree pieces brought to our program. I

was energized, so I added loose parts. Acorns, tree cookies, shells, and even feathers donated from a parent who had gone turkey hunting. I watched as these became the materials the children used repeatedly. I began removing more and more "stuff" that I thought I needed as an early educator.

### Water is Always a Winner

I wish I would have realized sooner the power of water in learning and play spaces. Water is truly magical. It breaks down all the barriers of verbal and non-verbal learners, the leaders and the followers, the young and the old. It is like the puddle in the parking lot—it is an immediate attraction. It is calming and joyful. Whether you add a rain barrel, buckets of water or misters hanging from trees or buildings, you will add math, science, giggles and collaboration. We buried a rain barrel and added a pump. It was cheap, aesthetically pleasing, and full of learning. From taking turns, sharing buckets, or learning how to "prime" a pump after a three-day weekend, the magic is there.



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We also took an area of our play space that was having erosion issues and created a rain garden to collect runoff. We filled the space with native plants and pollinators, creating an instant science lab. Rain gardens will give you a curriculum that changes on a daily basis. You will suddenly have worms, butterflies and birds as part of mental health breaks for you, your staff and your students. Nature allows for deep concentration, allowing a child's interest to enhance the learning in a group of friends. What could be better? The best part was that our city had a rain garden program that we took advantage of. Check with your city, county and state agencies to see if there is grant money available for your site.

## Metamorphosis

I watched as the learning changed. It became more child-led. The research I had been reading was playing out before my very eyes. This was the really good stuff. Discipline problems

disappeared, friendships became deeper and more caring. Our program was shifting. With that shift came parents who saw the change and spread the word about our family child care and outdoor education. Parents understood the research. We follow the child's lead in learning all about the bird building its nest in a nearby bush, or the worm slithering across the sidewalk. We give them time. Time to explore, and wonder, and foster a vibrant and innovative learning community. Our children are guided by their own curiosity, in the natural environment that is their classroom. The learning is authentic and meaningful to the children because we build on the children's ideas and knowledge.

## Natural Environments are All-Inclusive

Learning in natural environments, with natural materials, levels the playing field for all children from all backgrounds. Whether we bring natural materials into the classroom or

add a patch of turf to the playground, we can re-invent what we have to work with to make it calmer, more aesthetically pleasing, and good for the souls of all who enter our space. Adding a bird feeder outside a window, wind chimes to a tree, or a large rock for climbing on the playground, we bring nature to our programs. Bringing nature and nature-based pedagogy to every child's education builds guardians of the planet and calmer days in the lives of our children and their families. That little bit of nature may be the only nature they encounter all week.

Research reminds us, the more children play outdoors, the stronger the brain connections, as well as increased muscular strength and cognitive development. An active body will lead you to a sleepy child. Play hard. Nap well. Sleep on that.



My biggest challenge to a full day of outdoor learning was naps. Could we nap outdoors? It was something I had been trying to wrap my head around for many years. I kept trying to visualize hammocks, and had never found an ideal location or space. Would the children be able to sleep in a hammock? Would there be safety issues involved?

The pandemic pushed me out of my comfort zone and forced me to figure it out. I still did not have an ideal space for hammocks. My students were used to cots, so I decided I would skip the hammocks and continue our routine of sleeping on the cots. The success of napping outdoors was almost immediate. Let me share this secret with you. Children sleep so much better outdoors! Day one, I discovered that as the sun moves, so does the shade. Yikes! We adapted. We moved the furniture off the covered pergola, and added a fan and shades to block the hot summer sun.

Do not give up after the first day! The second day will be easier and the third will seem like the new normal. Yes, mov-



Photo by Dianne Gano

ing the cots takes a bit of effort. Setting up cots and putting them away always is. Accept it. I promise you, this is worth the wee bit of extra effort! Outdoor play leaves educators with tired children who will sleep through barking dogs, sirens and even train whistles.