

Outdoor Schools

Jack Mitemeyer

Frolicking in the grass, exploring the forest, drawing in a journal: these are everyday activities at Nature School LA. Biljana Milasin is the Director and founder of this school which is one of the growing number of about [585 nature based preschools](#) in the United States.

“It's a big space,” Milsan said. “Today, one of the kids said to me, “ I saw a snake!”

Her programs are located in Los Angeles and offered in Ernest E. Debs park in the East Montecito section of the city and in Culver City.

According to [Natural Start Alliance](#) the number of outdoor preschools has risen by nearly 25 times in the last decade. There has not been another study since the COVID pandemic so the numbers may be increasing even more. The virus has brought to light some of the many benefits of being outdoors including the reduced risk of spreading illnesses.

Just over 100 years ago, during the Tuberculosis outbreak, there was a shift in the United States to move schools outdoors. Mary Korr wrote in the [Rhode Island Medical Journal](#) that “Two women Fellows of the Rhode Island Medical Society, Drs. Mary S. Packard and Ellen A. Stone, launched a nationwide movement when the first fresh-air school for tubercular children opened in Providence in 1908.” Outdoor schools also opened in Germany. The first open air school opened in a forest in a town near Berlin in 1904.

Milasin grew up and went to college in Germany, where she fostered her love for the outdoors. She has been working in education since 1994. One of her greatest memories was when she was a child at her home in Germany. One day she and her cousin were

playing outside in the rain. When the rain settled, they began building canals in a stream that had formed. Using their imaginations to shift the water in different directions. From this experience she knows the importance for children to have unstructured play outdoors.

Learning about the environment in the environment is a great way for the children to learn. Milasin mentioned that one day when it was cloudy, they decided to focus the lesson on learning about the clouds. Months later she was talking to the parent of a student and heard that the child was still pointing out the names of clouds in the sky.

These programs take place even when it is raining.

As with her own childhood experience, Milasin said that the rainy days are often the best and most memorable days. She talked about how during these days there is often a strong bonding experience between the kids as well as with the instructor.

With the world starting to open back up after the peak of the COVID pandemic one service that was much needed by many parents is preschool. However, with COVID still spreading and the rise of the delta variant parents may still be weary about sending their toddler to a school indoors. The [Green Schoolyards of America](#), started the COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative. "The Initiative seeks to equitably improve learning, mental and physical health, and happiness for children and adults using an affordable, time-tested outdoor approach to keeping schools open during a pandemic."

During these programs Milasin says she tries to keep the kids' hands busy as much as possible, with activities and interactions like playing in the woods and drawing in their journals. The goal is to allow them to be creative and interact with their environment. Starting at 8:30 and going until 1:30, the day is driven by the children's interests. There are about 10 to 14 children in the class ages averaging around 3-5.

“It's like this, once people set up a classroom, it doesn't change. You have for how many days the same classroom. And I look at what we do. And I think this is where the unstructured time is important,” says Milasin. So, we have about twice a day, 30-45 minutes of structured, teacher instructed time, and I think that's great. Out of five hours, that's great. The rest of the time, there is a huge chunk of unstructured time. And that means it is not teacher led, the teacher is just there to make sure they're safe, following them around supporting their play.”

While the entire day is spent in the park, Milasin does use some technology. “I use it purely for educational reasons,” she says. For a presentation, a slideshow, totally pre-selected images, they're not allowed to touch it, they can only point, so there is a way to educate about it.”

There are also studies that show the health benefits of children learning and spending time outdoors fostering [creativity in students](#). For example, Milasin mentioned that in her class the kids “found like a palm leaf, I cannot even tell what it is. But it's very sturdy, and the kids are using it as a sled or slide, they're learning to take turns. How long is it? We are incorporating the number that we talked about, the number three.”

Outdoor education is also shown to help [children focus](#). With an increasing number of children being [diagnosed with ADHD](#) there have been studies showing the outdoors and green spaces have the [potential to help alleviate the symptoms](#). On top of that, outdoor education has even been shown to help reduce [behavioral problems](#).

A few hours north of Los Angeles in Los Osos, there is Harmony's Garden School, an outdoor preschool run out of a backyard. Rosina Whalen, a teacher at the school, said that every day the children start off with about a half an hour of structured time in the morning, and then it transitions into whatever the children want to do. This ranges from playing with wooden toys to climbing trees. Like LA Nature School there are only about 10 children attending at a time, with ages averaging from 3-5.

When COVID was at its peak they were closed for about two to three weeks but were then able to open back up.

In Los Angeles, gaining access to outdoor areas is often challenging. However, [The Outdoor Classroom Project](#) is an LA based organization that is working towards increasing the number of outdoor preschool programs. While these programs are not quite as immersed in woods as Milasin's, they work to provide better outdoor spaces at existing schools.

The outdoor school movement is not exclusive to the United States. According to [Learning Through Landscapes](#), a United Kingdom based organization, in Scotland they "have an expectation for all early years and childcare settings to facilitate 'free play', 'risk and challenge' and 'contact with nature' on a daily basis."

Back in the U.S., the push for outdoor education isn't new. [The North American Association for Environmental Education](#) (NAAEE) has recently reached its 50th anniversary. While some of this organization's activities are geared towards outdoor schooling, much of its focus is to ensure quality environmental education in the United States. They provide different guidelines and classes to help ensure excellent environmental education.

COVID has forced educators to look at the benefits of being outdoors. Whether it be a place safe from spreading the virus or a place to stay active and get out of the house. With all of its benefits the future of children's education may be anchored in interacting and learning outdoors.