

Chicago Botanic Garden  
Inspiring Nature Play: Mindful Connections  
Wednesday, May 1, 2019

### Schedule & Session Descriptions

8:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

#### LIBRARY TABLE

Martha Meyer, Evanston Public Library  
Sheri Reda, Wilmette Public Library

8:30 – 9 a.m.

#### CHECK IN & REGISTRATION

9 – 9:30 a.m.

#### WELCOME & OVERVIEW OF THE DAY

9:30 – 10:40 a.m.

#### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

#### Nature Play & Brain Development—What's the Connection?

Marilyn Brink, M.Ed., manager of professional development and early childhood, Chicago Zoological Society  
Jennifer Rosinia, Ph.D., OTR/L, president of Kid Links Unlimited, Inc.

The body of evidence keeps growing—nature is good for children and really good for the brain! Spending time in nature is essential for children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Knowing this information and identifying each child's inherent curiosity and drive to experience from the world around them, you have the makings of optimal learning experiences. We'll explore the role of nature and nature play in the life of each young child, make connections between the influence of nature on the developing brain in the service of a child's development and learning, and consider the types of interactions young children have with grown-ups that support healthy brain development. How are problem solving, thinking skills, social competence, and physical development enhanced by experiences in and with nature facilitated by adults in those environments? We'll conclude by offering prompts and questions to think about during your conference sessions.

10:50 – 11:35 a.m.

#### CONCURRENT SESSIONS

#### Building Nature Play Spaces in Chicago Parks

Sean Shaffer, Chicago Park District

The Chicago Park District is committed to nature play. We already have all we need: fallen trees, the crews to move them, and strong community. From Walking Stick Woods to the story of a tree that fell in Welles Park (the kids certainly heard it!) to full-scale nature play spaces popping up

throughout the city, we'll cover the mission to bring more nature play to Chicago's neighborhoods. We will share lessons learned, make scale-model play spaces with our Nature Kits, and discuss ways to bring nature play to your own neighborhood.

#### Engineering Is for the Birds!

Colleen McVeigh, Field Museum

Children learn by doing and by working through problems. This hands-on workshop provides a variety of means to explore birds. Through literature, artifacts, and hands-on activities, participants will explore variations of bird nest style and material, as well as the complexity of bird nest construction. Participants will practice using natural materials to engineer a viable nest and will learn means to engage students in collaborative problem solving. In addition, the presenter will delve into the use of problem-based activities to foster appreciation of nature, language development, and critical thinking skills.

#### How Nature Can Support Children's Mental Health

Gretchen Zagzebski, Inspire Counseling Center

Research shows that engaging in nature is a protective factor against negative mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, fewer children and teenagers are seeking out these health benefits leading Richard Louv to identify a "Nature-Deficit Disorder." It is up to parents and educators to encourage interaction with the natural world, as well as nature play. This presentation will explore current negative mental health trends, from where these potentially stem, how nature can help reverse these trends, and ways to foster a healthy relationship with nature at different stages of child development.

#### Incorporating Environmental Education into Your Early Childhood Center

Meghan Bowe, Environmental Education Association of Illinois

Rachel Schaller, Elmhurst Academy of Learning

The session will explore incorporating environmental education into early childhood settings with activities that connect children with the natural environment in developmentally appropriate ways. The activities incorporate literacy, math, art, music, and science. Educators will gain insight into how to incorporate nature by focusing on environmental topics, bringing the outdoors into their classroom, and utilizing their outdoor environment to create a sense of wonder and adventurous curiosity in their children. Each activity can be connected to Head Start domains and NAEYC standards, and expressed through innovative documentation for students and parents.

11:50 a.m. – 12:35 p.m.

#### CONCURRENT SESSIONS

#### Community Involvement Brings a Nature Playscape to Life!

Savannah Donovan, Anita Purves Nature Center, Urbana Park District

Chelsea Prahl, Anita Purves Nature Center, Urbana Park District

Learn how the Urbana Park District connected with the community to give children what *they* wanted in a nature playscape. Thousands of people have enjoyed the Friendship Grove Nature Playscape since its opening in 2017, demonstrating that this unique space meets community needs. This playscape was awarded the 2018 Governor's Hometown Award for community involvement and environmental stewardship. See photos and examples of programs, practice a design charrette, and explore how to creatively involve your target audience in planning, fundraising, design, and promotion.

### Hidden Treasures from the Garden: An Intergenerational Approach

Ana Nedelea, Sunshine Home Daycare

Is it the curiosity rooted deep down in human DNA? Is it the process of learning through doing and experimenting? Or pure joy generated by the play in the dirt? Whatever the reason, when working in the garden, a child will have the chance to experience the satisfaction that comes from caring for something over time, while observing the cycle of life firsthand. This presentation will focus on how to advocate for gardening with children and parents, how to ignite their interest in supporting the educator, and how to provide the right activities for a lifetime sustainability of gardening activities.

### Intellectual Estuaries in Nature Play

Marilyn Brink, Chicago Zoological Society

How can nature play support the idea of intellectual estuaries as a place where creativity and learning both converge and overlap? How can educators use language and interactions to nurture creativity and imagination in young children? Let's dig deeper following the keynote into this metaphor and learn an approach to talking with young children that will change your practice. We'll consider how nature play and educator interactions can converge in ways that enhance and extend the child's experience, build the young child's brain, and support learning and creativity.

### Mindfulness Nature Camp

Deirdre Guthrie, Fernwood Botanical Garden

Colleen Spano, Fernwood Botanical Garden

Designed by Fernwood Botanical Garden Wellbeing Program Director and Professor of Wellbeing Science (University of Notre Dame), the Fernwood Yoga Camp combines creative movement (yoga story using nature shapes and nature science metaphor), sensory stimulation (forest and sound bathing), and art (mandalas from nature materials) to create a mindful experience for kids ages 5-8. Co-facilitator has specialized experienced teaching yoga for kids of different abilities. Learn mindful tips to bring back home or to the classroom and have your own separate yoga class on the first day of camp.

12:35 – 1:35 p.m.

LUNCH & NETWORKING

1:35 – 2:20 p.m.

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

### A Cave in the Classroom

Jane Paha, Ancona School

Christopher Weber, Ancona School

Any teacher standing recess duty has witnessed students building shelters or play forts. There's something archetypal about this form of nature play, which can be found from forested grounds to urban tot lots. Shelter-building inspires creativity, collaboration, and exploration. This presentation will explore how to tap into students' shelter-building prowess. The keystone example will be a classroom "cave" modeled on Lascaux—complete with paintings in student-made natural pigments—but the presentation will also examine survival shelters, greenhouses, animal dens, and other applications. Drawing on teaching experiences, as well as scholarly literatures, compare and contrast spontaneously built shelters with shelters created to extend the curriculum.

### Feeling Welcome in Nature Spaces

Meg Rock, Garfield Park Community Alliance

Lydia Van Slyke, Garfield Park Community Alliance

This presentation addresses fostering equity in nature spaces, and why this must be cultivated intentionally. We will showcase examples from nature education programming for children at the Garfield Park Conservatory that have inclusivity as a goal. By welcoming people into the Conservatory and encouraging them to participate in programs and connect to the collection, we also encourage people to see nature around them in their neighborhoods. Nature doesn't just exist in curated spaces or untouched wilderness; nature is in the milkweed that grows in your alley, the locust tree on your block, and the bugs you might find in your backyard. Learn new ways to welcome people and connect everyone with nature.

### In the Moment

Jennifer Rosinia, Kid Links Unlimited, Inc.

Mindfulness means being in the moment. Research has identified many positive benefits of mindfulness on the brain, as well as the body. After a quick review of these findings, participants will be introduced to the eight sensory systems and the interrelated components of sensory processing. And then together we will identify, discuss, and explore ways to foster mindfulness through naturally occurring sensory experiences in nature. We might even get our own hands messy!

### Loose Parts in the Early Childhood Outdoor Classroom

Carla Gull, University of Phoenix

Loose parts is often an ambiguous term with different interpretations. According to Nicholson (1971), the theory of loose parts is an opportunity to express creativity through use of materials that can be manipulated, transformed, and created through self-guided play. There has been little research to support an exact definition of what this is and what it entails. A scoping review narrowed down over 2,400 articles related to "loose parts," "early childhood," and "outdoor classrooms" to 15 articles for in-depth review. From the selected research, a definition of loose parts in this context was formulated, a list of loose parts was analyzed, and descriptor words of the theory were discussed. A more uniform definition of loose parts potentially allows for more diverse application and use of this theory, greater implementation, and deeper conversations.

### The Next Level of Nature Play

Karen Holmes, Crabtree Nature Center, Forest Preserves of Cook County

Michele Mottlowitz, River Trail Nature Center, Forest Preserves of Cook County

Nature Centers at the Forest Preserves of Cook County were some of the earliest entities to design and install nature play spaces in the Chicago region. These spaces have been well-received and well used by families with young children, as well as preschool and primary grade elementary school groups. Join us for a discussion about where we go from here, as we unveil ideas to on how we plan to expand to include more adventurous elements for bigger kids and try to bring more community groups in to utilize the resource in different ways.

2:35 – 3:20 p.m.

### CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Forest Play: The Why, Where, and How of Nature Play in the Forest Preserves of Cook County

Jacqui Ulrich, Forest Preserves of Cook County

The Forest Preserves of Cook County encourages nature play and offers many opportunities for adventurous, fun play in the preserves. Nature centers, campgrounds, and a new tree house at Dan Ryan Woods provide unique play spaces with built structures for being playful, being active, and being restful. In addition, there are many opportunities to spontaneously play in nature at a picnic grove, or near a wooded area, lake, pond, or river. Discover the many places to play at the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Natural Wonders: Teaching Biomimicry  
Courtney Jackson, University of Illinois Extension

Biomimicry is a method of teaching students about the world around them in a way that is exciting and interactive. Students can study nature while learning a general foundation of engineering design. During this workshop, gain a better understanding of what biomimicry is and how to impart this information to students through hands-on activities. Experience an activity for immediate use in the classroom and take home resources to further your lessons. There is an emphasis on life science and animals and, while many of the lessons are geared toward the second and third grade band, educators of all grades are welcome.

Nature Play: A Catalyst for Language Development  
Jessica Fong, Chicago Public Schools

Explore a year-long research project involving pre-K students and the effects of nature play on language, as well as social emotional development. The research was conducted in the Little Village neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. Participants will understand effects of nature play on young children and think about social justice issues surrounding nature play. The objectives of this session are for teachers who are not engaging in nature play to learn strategies for starting and for teachers and administrators to have research to share with the community as to the benefits of nature play.

Outdoor Adventures: Tools to Support Children with Dynamic Sensory Profiles  
Jenna Heinrich, Beth Osten and Associates Pediatric and Adult Therapy Services

Aliza Soler, Beth Osten and Associates Pediatric and Adult Therapy Services  
During this session, explore how a child's sensory profile (individual responses to sensory information) can impact their participation in outdoor experiences. Explore various ideas and potential strategies that can be used to support a child. These strategies relate to the challenges that children can experience during the different phases of an outdoor activity. These phases include preparing a child for the experience beforehand, supporting a child in the moment during an activity, transitioning between activities, and leaving the experience.

Painting the Boulder Blue and Other Lessons in Publicly Managed Nature Play Sites  
Robin Cline, NeighborSpace

Alex Enarson, Alex Enarson Design and Build  
Chicago's community land trust NeighborSpace has built several community-designed nature play garden projects throughout Chicago's west and south sides. This session addresses: What happens when older kids like the play space just as much as the younger kids? What challenges and opportunities occur when unexpected plantings show up on the site? How can you build neighbor goodwill deep into the project? How can you anticipate the lifespan of a nature play project as a positive aspect of building spaces such as these? Learn how to acquire, shape, refresh, transform, and repair natural materials and natural relationships when they start to break down and change.

3:20 p.m.

## EVALUATION AND CPDU FORM COMPLETION

Inspiring Nature Play is possible because of the collaborative effort among the Chicago Botanic Garden, the Alliance for Early Childhood, BackYard Nature Center, Greeley Elementary School, the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Natural Start Alliance (a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education), and Northfield Community Nursery School.