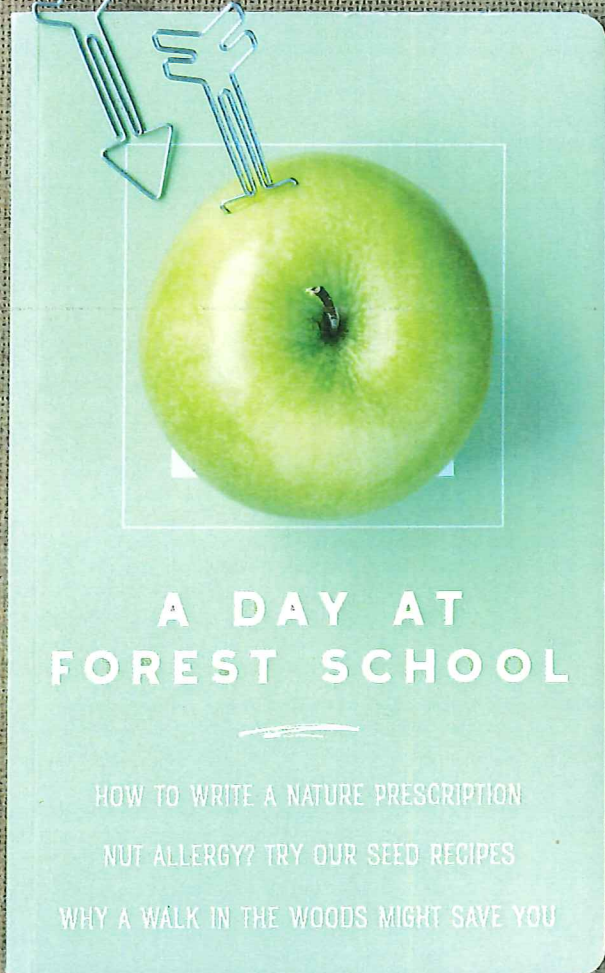
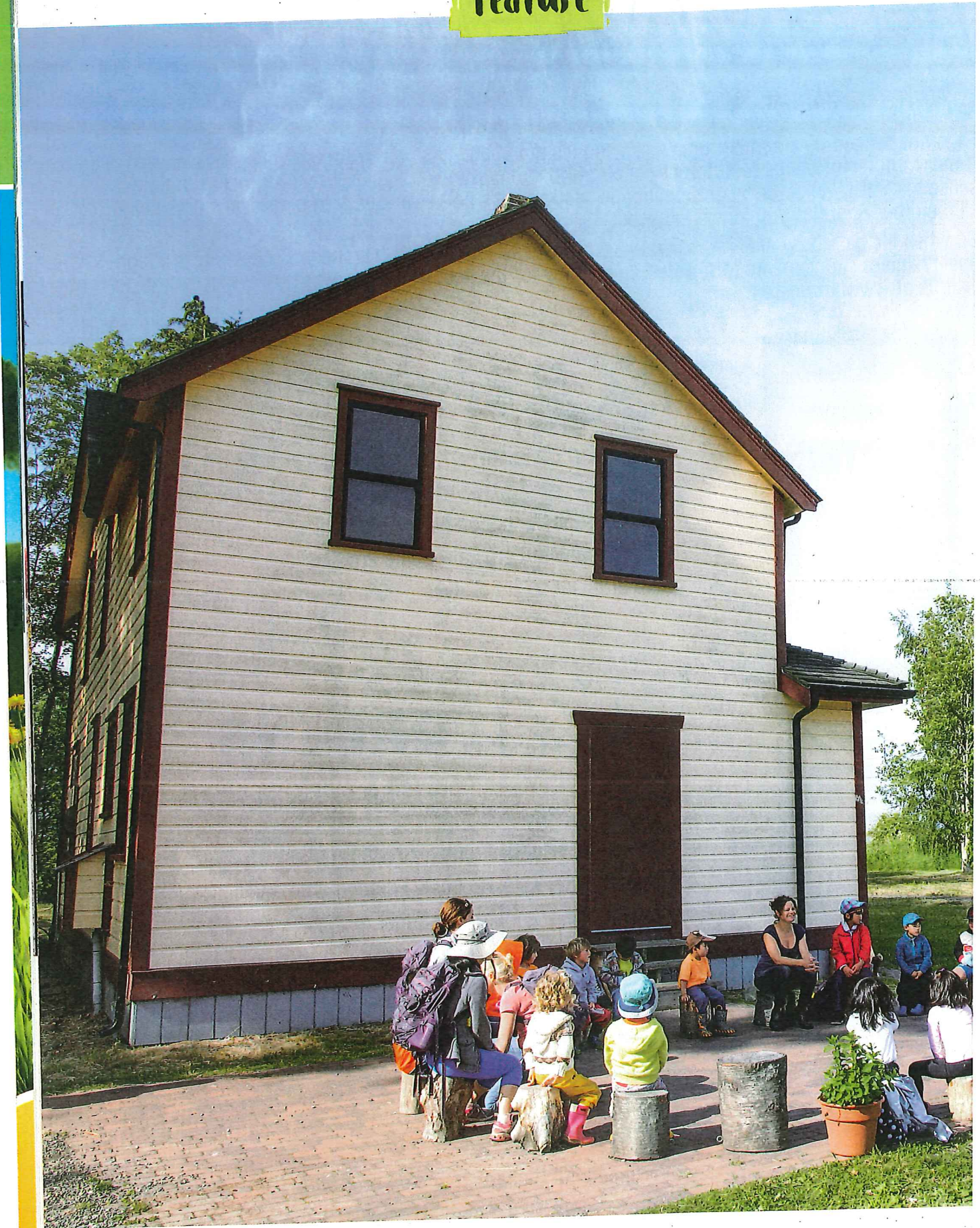


sage

Natural living for you and your family



Feature





When nature is your classroom

sage visited a forest school.
Here's what we learned.

WORDS BY ISABELA VERA & VANESSA ANNAND
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNY DIAS

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE about Terra Nova Nature School is the quiet. The garden plots. The cluster of wooden bee hives. The sprawling parkland nearby—an expanse of tall grass and scattered forest. The pale yellow heritage building that acts as the school's headquarters. It's a lovely old wooden structure, but the children who come here spend most of their time somewhere else: outside. >

What is a forest school? Exactly what it sounds like. **Children enrolled in forest school have regular, frequent, long-term access to an outdoor space, with an emphasis on play-based learning.**

Natural materials facilitate creative, open-ended experiences, and learning is shaped by the landscape.

Forest schools are leading a global movement to connect children with the world around them. They first burst onto the scene in the woodlands of Scandinavia during the 1950s. The benefits of an outdoor curriculum soon became apparent, and their popularity skyrocketed throughout the UK. In 2008, Canada's first forest school opened near Ottawa; similar programs have launched around the country since.

According to Kate Dawson and Emily Vera, early childhood educators at Terra Nova Nature School, place-based education means the curriculum is informed by the natural setting. Students learn the intricacies and nuances of the landscape, as it is both constant and always changing.

"Think of place-based education as the 100-mile diet of curricula," Dawson says. "Children come to know a particular place intimately—it shapes all of their experiences."

Place-based education allows students to create deep, lasting relationships with their educators, their peers and the environment, without the confines of four walls.

There's no set forest school prototype. Schools are open to students from a variety of age groups and can vary by name—from "bush kinder" in Melbourne, Australia, to Vera and Dawson's "nature school" in Richmond, BC, that sage stopped by one sunny morning.

*

At Terra Nova Nature School, the day begins with all the children sitting on cedar stumps in a circle, singing songs and learning what they will do that day.

They're given choices as they break into smaller groups. Some follow an educator to

plant seedlings in the school garden. Others are taken elsewhere on the property to examine plants with magnifying glasses. The rest of the kids review how to pick plants from the garden. Lemony sorrel leaves are a favourite—after they've been checked for bugs.

The children aren't just going through the motions of planting and harvesting. They seem able to translate what they've learned to new situations. When one student eats a cherry, she saves the pit in a cupped palm: she wants to plant it.

*

Forest school programs maintain that being knowledgeable about the environment pushes students to preserve it. Kids are inspired to seek out nature-based activities with their families and share what they have learned.

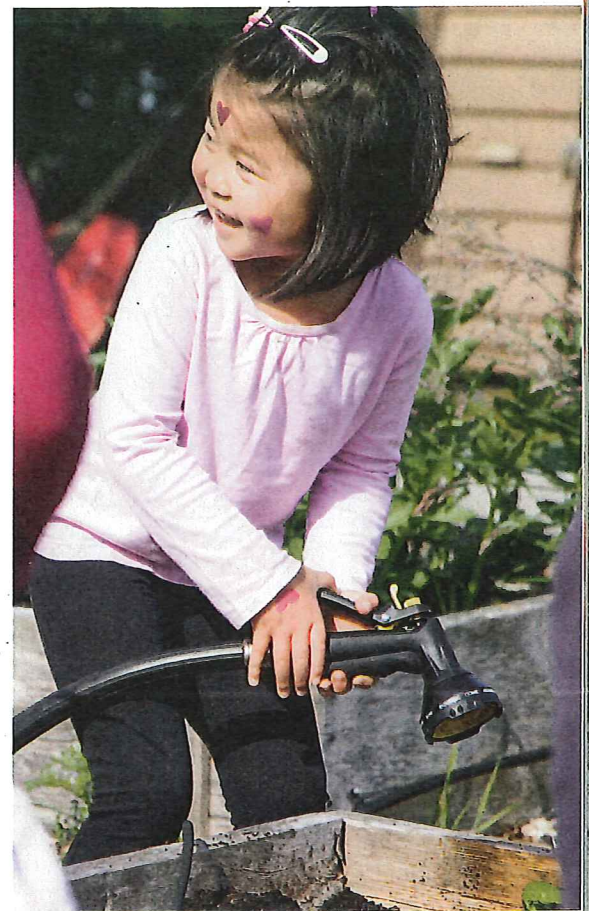
Through classroom activities like recycling, composting and gardening, Vera and Dawson have seen their students become increasingly eco-aware. Children learn about symbiotic relationships and that each entity is to be respected and cherished.

"We want our children to be mindful about taking what they need from the land, whether it is a dandelion or carrot from our garden," says Vera.

*

The kids are prepared for any weather the morning might bring. Many tromp around in rain boots even though the sun is out. The educators look more like mountain guides than cardigan-clad teachers: they wear backpacks and thick-soled shoes and carry crackling walkie-talkies.

It's not just the rain that's unpredictable: as one child waters the newly planted seedlings with a hose, she accidentally mists her peers standing nearby. No one seems upset by the sprinkling. They're too busy noticing the rainbow created by the spray.



With some forest school students spending 80 to 90 percent of their time outside, students learn to embrace all types of weather.

"Rain brings delightful activities such as puddle jumping, catching drops on tongues and sliding down slippery, muddy hills," says Dawson.

As long as the kids have the right gear, a rain-or-shine mentality pushes them to become more resilient and self-disciplined. Rain boots and a jacket—or sunscreen and a sun cap—are all they need.

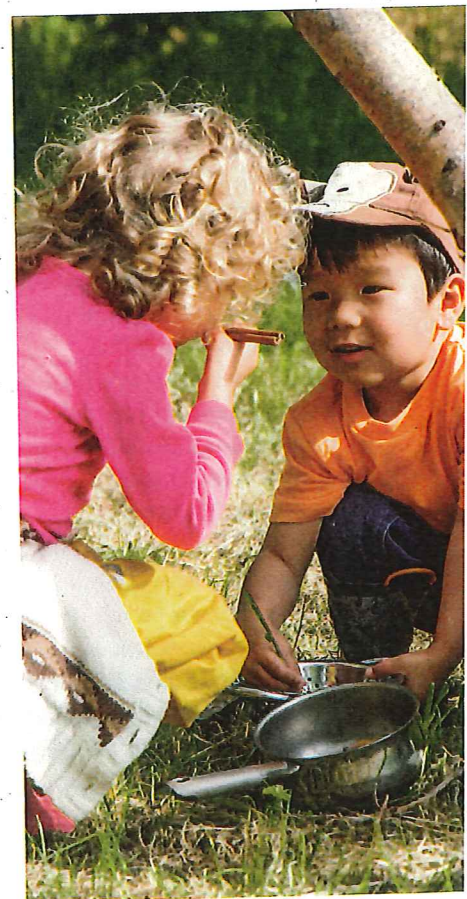
With kids in general spending more time indoors than ever, forest school is a wonderful way to reconnect our youngest generation with our greatest resource. **Research shows that by spending time outside, children become more physically capable and boost their levels of vitamin D.**

"The children have become more observant of the world around them and more confident in their physical skills," says Dawson. "Their stamina has increased, and we see them shine in a way not possible in an indoor setting."

*

As the morning progresses, a few of the children head over to a pair of makeshift structures erected in the shade. Bits of white fabric tied to carefully arranged branches catch in the wind, billowing above tiny pots and old spoons set out on tree rings.

The children pull up grass and scoop up gravel, concocting an imaginary meal. A nearby basket of pinecones, wood and cinnamon sticks inspires the menu: cinnamon soup. While there's a lesson to be learned—they decide not to make the soup too sweet, because too much sugar isn't good—the focus is on play. >



"At Terra Nova Nature School, the day begins with all the children sitting on cedar stumps in a circle, singing songs and learning what they will do that day."

Play is a crucial aspect of a child's emotional development, allowing students to socialize and explore their creativity. Play helps children to articulate their needs, build relationships and develop their own ideas.

Playing tag, sliding down hills, creating elaborate stories, whirling in circles through green space—through days that are structured and purposeful, forest school puts kids back in touch with their surroundings and their physical selves.

"Kids need to be out exploring, imagining, skinning their knees and climbing trees," says Mathilde Wennefolde. Now studying at the University of Melbourne, she has fond memories of playing as a child at forest school in Norway.

"The corn had just been cut in our field, and we were running along the rows of stalks, scraping them with our hands," she says. "I just remember feeling really free."

It's not just that playing outside is fun: it seems to improve children's outcomes. **Forest school curricula became the standard for preschoolers in Denmark when educators found that attendees developed stronger social and teamwork skills, with higher levels of self-esteem.**

At Terra Nova, parents have noted to Dawson and Vera that their kids are becoming increasingly independent and insightful. Indeed, research links outdoor education to sharper critical thinking skills, lower-stress levels and a higher capacity to pay attention. Children learn to observe and listen to their environment, and assess risks as they come.

Vera and Dawson have both taught indoors in the past. They find that **children seem inspired to start more meaningful conversations at nature school compared to indoor preschool.**

"Outside, they enjoy showing each other their findings and exchanging ideas," Vera says. "They have conversations about animals on the land. We have heard deep discussions about where a scat came from—was it from a coyote or an eagle?"

*

By mid-morning the children are ready to go farther afield. A wood-paneled wagon full of lunch kits, thermoses and tarps appears, and the group sets out on a path into the parkland adjacent to the school. It's not the easiest terrain: the children navigate prickly branches, and a few help push and pull the wagon.

Once out of the thicker bushes (the perfect spot for a quick game of hide and seek), the wagon is parked and some of its cargo unloaded: capes lined with feathers. When they put on their capes, the children become eagles. They climb a hill so they can dash down it on Vera's cue.

"The eagles are getting ready to leave the nest," Vera calls to them. "They're looking far into the distance. They're getting ready to soar."

Right on cue, an eagle appears overhead. The children point and shriek in delight, then spread their arms and fly down the hill. 🦅