

It's time to get the kids outside to play



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An early childhood forum about the importance of outdoor play was held at Shelburne Farms in Shelburne recently. It was designed to explore what is being done by organizations throughout Vermont to support efforts that allow children structured and unstructured time to play in the natural world.

The event was free. Linda Wellings, director of School Programs at Shelburne Farms, had a few words to say about the event.

We spoke to her April 2. **Burlington Free Press:** How are you involved in this Shelburne Farms forum?

Linda Wellings: I am

one of the organizers and facilitators for the three forums being held around the state. I will help facilitate the presentations.

BFP: Is this the first time it is being held there?

LW: This is the first time this group of organizations and individuals are sponsoring an event like this. Besides Shelburne Farms, Four Winds Nature Institute staff, Cory Stephenson and Jen Brown, have helped plan and will help facilitate the event. Lindsey Vandal and Amy Butler of North Branch Nature Center are also involved in the planning and will participate in running the forums.

An April 4 forum was held last week and the Bennington Early Childhood Center will host the third forum on April 22.

These forums are also being offered as part of

The Children & Nature Network's National Let's G.O.! campaign.

BFP: Why is it being offered?

LW: Children today face increasing societal pressures, from the push for academics at an earlier age to replacement of recess to be more plugged in. Congruently, we have seen an upsurge of childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, and children diagnosed with ADHD. This forum will promote conversation around how we, as individuals, educators, and communities, may raise healthier and happier children by increasing the amount of time children play in the natural world. We hope to create networks with others to continue the conversation, find resources, and take action in our home, schools, and organizations.

BFP: What will the forum consist of?

LW: The forum will be participant driven with small group discussions and the opportunity to network with others. Of course, part of the forum will be outdoors. Wear shoes and clothing for a short, easy hike. Participants will be asked to recall personal early play experiences in nature and the memories that experience

BFP: Explain why a forum like this one is beneficial to our community.

LW: The U.S. Center for Disease Control reports that 7 percent of children from ages 6 to 11 have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder, amounting to 1.7 million youth. Spending time in nature reduces the symptoms of ADD and ADHD. Children diag-

nosed with attention disorders concentrate better after spending at least 20 minutes outside daily. Additionally, symptoms of ADHD are milder after children spend time in green settings.

Biophilia describes human's innate attraction to the natural world. Despite this biological interest, many of America's youth suffer from nature deficit disorder-youth today spend significantly less time in nature than past generations. This has repercussions for child health and development. Children's time spent playing in the outdoors helps create opportunities for emotional and mental maturation.

BFP: Who will attend? How many do you hope will attend?

LW: We've invited parents, grandparents, prac-

ticing teachers, and soon to be teachers, all types of child care providers whether in a formal school setting or a nature center to attend. We are hoping 40-50 attendees will be at each forum.

BFP: What do you hope participants will walk away with?

LW: We hope they will walk away with:

» A commitment to help support children's right and need to play outdoors!

» Connections with others to form a grass-roots network to continue the work

» Resources with information to aid in this task

BFP: What else should people know about the forum?

LW: It's free! They will leave energized to support children of all ages to play outdoors