

Flourishing in Nature

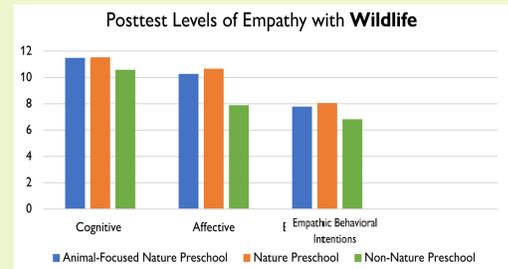
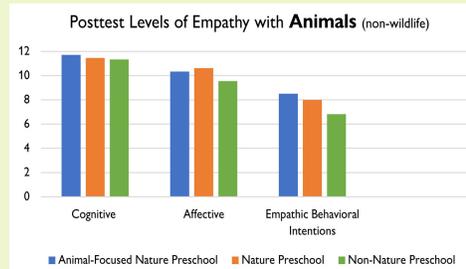
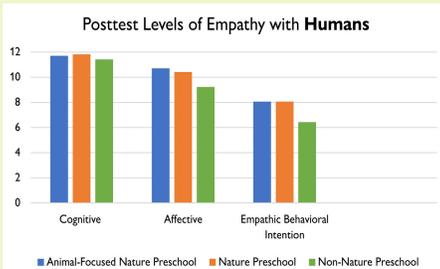
Investigating the Impact of Nature Preschools on Young Children's Empathy

Overview. Empathy is the understanding and sharing of others' feelings and is positively associated with caring behaviors toward people, wildlife and nature. There has been a decline in children's empathy, speculated to be in part from societal changes in social media use, family size, and parenting styles. Empathy is affected by neural development and is a teachable skill, particularly in early childhood when brains are developing. The purpose of this study was to explore the potential for nature preschools to promote young children's empathy. Three nature preschools (49 participants), two animal-focused nature preschools (38 participants), and three non-nature preschools (37 participants) participated in the study. Children's cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and empathetic behavioral intention were measured at the beginning and end of a school year using a modified version of the Young Children's Empathy Measure with Humans and Animals. Empathy was assessed in the context of empathy towards humans, non-wildlife animals, and wildlife.



Image Credit: Secret Forest Preschool

Results. When accounting for pretest levels of empathy, age, and gender, significant results across preschool types were found for empathetic behavioral intentions towards humans and animals, and cognitive and affective empathy towards wildlife. Nature and animal-focused nature preschool children had higher levels of empathetic behavioral intentions towards humans than the non-nature preschoolers. Nature and animal-focused nature preschool children also had higher levels of cognitive and affective empathy towards wildlife than the non-nature preschoolers. The empathetic behavioral intentions toward animals were also significantly higher for children in the animal-focused nature preschools.



Conclusion. The results of this study suggest nature preschools and animal-focused nature preschools can be an effective mechanism for fostering children's empathy. Increased empathy towards wildlife is a goal of many wildlife conservation organizations as it correlates with empathy towards nature and positive environmental behaviors; nature preschools could play a role in these organizations. The growth of empathetic behavioral intentions is particularly noteworthy in light of the relationship between childhood prosocial behaviors and dispositions for prosocial behaviors in adulthood. Thus, nature preschools and animal-focused nature preschools can be an important avenue for consideration in the quest for social justice and sustainability, fostering in children the inclination to not only be responsive to others around them but toward on-going inclinations for helping behaviors as they grow into adolescence and young adulthood.

