

# Norway's Early Childhood Outdoor Education Program



In May 2003, I was able to return to my hometown, Drammen, Norway, and spend eight days visiting a unique *natur barnehage* (nature kindergarten). This program serves three-, four-, and five-year-olds. It was designed for a class of 18 students to spend every other week hiking and playing in the forest park and then the following week inside in a traditional preschool setting. Rain, snow, and sleet do not prevent these youngsters from exploring the outdoors for six hours every day.

The class is supervised by one qualified early childhood teacher and two assistants. The teachers were supportive and encouraging—masters at providing smooth, comfortable transition times. Independence was strongly encouraged as the children put on their own rubber boots, rain pants, and jackets. Each child carried a sturdy backpack containing clothes, water, and lunch.

When everyone was ready, two children were allowed to walk in front of the teacher. All the children were holding someone's hand as they walked down the sidewalk and started up a hill to the forest. It took about 30 minutes to walk up two very steep hills. Once the children reached the entrance to the forest, they were free to run. They had a designated bench where everyone met before making the final trek to the campground. The children reminded me of agile goats as they explored all sorts of interesting rocks, shortcuts, and trails. One little girl pointed to the flora and said, "These plants are the beautiful decorations in the forest."

The children ran happily into their familiar campground. The first thing they did was to place their backpacks on the sturdy logs around the

campfire. During the next five days, it was fascinating to observe how the children interacted with the environment, which was totally lacking in traditional preschool toys and equipment. Conflicts were rare. The children had plenty of space and an abundance of opportunities to use their imaginations, physical skills, verbal skills, observational skills, creativity, and five senses to explore the outdoors. The adults and children had worked hard to create a fascinating outdoor environment. They had used sturdy branches and ropes to build several huts, a store, and a variety of swings. Two hammocks were hanging between some trees, providing fun and a cozy space for someone who might need a private spot. For use on very cold days, there was a large tepee with a wood-burning stove at the bottom of the hill.

Children usually played in groups of two or three, cooperating and developing their social skills. These youngsters placed dirt, leaves, sticks, rocks, weeds, flowers, and water in recycled containers to create make-believe drinks and food such as soup to share or sell. Reference books helped the students identify plants, birds, trees, insects, animals, and animal droppings. The class enjoyed lunch as a group, and at 3:00 P.M. they hiked back to the classroom. The children gathered in the wardrobe area, which contained cubbies large enough for the children to sit in and store their belongings. Sitting in their individual cubbies, they recounted the events of the day. The teacher recorded these events, and the journal is available to the parents on a daily basis. 🌍👥

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Starting out



View of the city



Preparing lunch



Observing slugs

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