



A study by the American Institutes for Research found that children who attended outdoor science school showed significantly larger gains than the control group in several personal and social skills, such as conflict resolution, self-esteem, and motivation to learn. <http://www.seer.org/pages/research/AIROOutdoorSchool2005.pdf>

she adds. “Each class is able to sit around a bonfire sipping hot apple cider. The children are constantly moving around the play spaces, so that helps generate body heat, as do their hikes during class.

“Being outdoors is a huge risk mitigation method during the time of COVID-19,” Kerr continues. “The only times the children are brought inside are to use the bathroom. If it’s very cold outside or thunder rolls in, they can use the classroom to warm up.” Masks are worn outdoors, as well, regardless of vaccination status. “No one ever complains about wearing a mask,” she adds.

Further south and in a far more urban environment, Tamarack Waldorf School, a K4 through eighth grade Waldorf-style program located on Brady Street, is also following an outdoor-focused teaching model. “Waldorf education really holds nature — and being out in nature and observing nature — in a very high esteem, even in kindergarten,” explains seventh-grade teacher James Boland. “With the pandemic, we really worked on how to come back to in-person learning in a way that kept people as safe as we possibly could.”

Federal funding dollars were used to purchase supplies to equip students to be outside for much longer periods of time, Boland adds, and an environmental educator was hired to “up the ante” on environmental education. “Students have classes twice a week [with Peter DeBoer], where they go out and observe plant education, waterways, and do science work,” Boland says. “We don’t have space for outdoor classrooms, so our next best thing was to make mobile classrooms with wagons, chairs, chalkboards and clipboards. There is a limitation on certain things you can do, but there’s also quite a bit you can do outside of the classroom that you can’t do inside.”

Boland says students crave that outside time, and that Tamarack has worked to find a balance between instructional and social outdoor time. “We really looked at it as a mental health situation,” he adds. “The students really need to be outside, and they need to be able to be social. We have really strong safety measures; the students are masked, even outside.

“We’ve been able to do a pretty admirable job of keeping those students in the classroom, even if it’s outside the classroom.” MKE

MODERN PARENTING

Opportunities Abound — Outside

How two local schools shifted to outdoor learning amid an ever-present pandemic.

BY JEN KENT | PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAGGIE KERR

I’m writing this column at the tail end (or so we hope!) of the Omicron surge. My husband and I spent three weeks juggling work, childcare, fatigue, and our family’s bouts with the variant-of-the-moment — a true *deja vu* moment, as if we had transported back to mid-2020. He and my daughter fell prey to Omicron, while my son and I escaped its clutches. Nonetheless, three weeks without daycare, due to the obvious quarantine and isolation guidelines, felt especially draining this time around.

Despite the fact that we sincerely adore our daycare center and how it’s handled the pandemic, I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to looking into alternate care options for our 4-year-old son, who is now of preschool age. It’s likely he’d benefit from a bit more consistency in his routine, so the thought of enrolling him in a more outdoor-focused program, in which the children spend the majority of their time outside to mitigate the risk of infection, piqued my interest.

And because there’s no greater validation than a sound recommendation from another mother, I reached out to a former colleague and fellow mom-of-two, Maggie Kerr, for her input. (Kerr is a professional makeup artist, and has worked on numerous fashion editorials for this magazine). Her eldest son attended the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center’s Nature Preschool, and her youngest son will graduate from the preschool program this year.

“My second son started preschool at [Schlitz] Audubon in 2020, when we were all still in lockdown,” recalls Kerr. “When the pandemic first started, he was only 2.5 years old. He was just starting to be socialized [via activities] ... but all that got taken away. Schlitz was going to be THE place where he was going to be socialized. I couldn’t have asked for a more supportive environment to be thrown back into with people — people outside of his four-person bubble.”

Kerr says classes are held entirely outdoors, a departure from the preschool’s pre-pandemic indoor/outdoor learning hybrid model, and families are expected to dress their children to brave the elements. “The school also invested in outdoor heaters that children can gather around in the [outdoor] classroom to warm up a bit, and — my favorite — they invested in outdoor fire pits,”