



# ***Outdoor/Land-based Education in Urban Settings***

*Following: A Seasonal Pedagogy*

*At Silverthorn Early Learning Earth Centre (SELEC)*



# Silverthorn Early Learning Earth Centre Team

## Preschool Program

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What has your experience with outdoor/land-based education taught you?



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# Land-Based Learning: A Seasonal Pedagogy



From Dr. Hopi Martin's teachings:

“The interesting thing about this description of the natural, life-giving process we experience every Four Seasons, is that those four concepts of Birth, Movement, Relationships, and Passing also describe the life cycle of every living thing on the planet: from the smallest insect to the oldest trees. In terms of human development, we experience this process over the course of our entire lifetime, but also when we play. The careful observation of infants and young children during unstructured, free play reveals this same Circle, particularly when they are touching Mother Earth.” (Martin, 2023, para. 10)

# Seasonal Pedagogy

## Seasonal Pedagogy in connection with How Does Learning Happen?

### **Birth/Well-being:**

Hearing and seeing something that catches the attention of the child and sparks their movement

**“What experience sparked wonder in the child/ren or in you?” (Martin, 2021, para. 7)**

### **Movement/Engagement**

: children active in play  
'what's happening'  
(observation)

**What movements brought the child/ren or you into deeper engagement with that wonder? (Martin, 2021, para. 9)**

### **Relationship/Belonging:**

Children building connections with everything around them i.e peers, adults, the land, their play

**What relationships developed through the Land, between children, adults, or multiple generations? (Martin, 2021, para. 11)**

### **Passing/Expression:**

Children giving back to the land, peers or adults within their play.

**What is the story of learning? How does it give back to community? (Martin, 2021, para. 13)**

### **References**

Edge of the Bush. (2023). Where Worldviews Meet. Retrieved from: <https://edgeofthebush.ca/a-seasonal-pedagogy/>  
Storypark. (2023). Land as first teacher: Retrieved from: <https://ca.storypark.com/resources/land-as-first-teacher>



# Birth: Summer Solstice

Transition from Spring to Summer



## Exploring Summer

## Building and Exploring with Loose Parts



Scale exploration with crates, a plank and wood cookies



Creating bridges with small blocks and stones



Tower building & Construction play



# Construction and Building Materials

Many varieties of blocks

- Large to small
- Solid and hollow blocks

Wood cookies and cut wood pieces

Planks

Logs

Crates

Bark

Sticks

Cardboard pieces

Tires

Spools

Rocks

Dramatic materials (hats, tools, pylons)



# Large loose parts



Large branches  
Tires  
Spools  
Logs



Creating a 'car' with tires, a spool and a wood cookie

## Loose Parts + Water



What materials sink or float?

Creating boats with tin foil and bark



Corks  
Bottle caps  
Bark pieces  
Leaves

Stones  
Pinecones  
Tin foil  
Seashells

# Relationship Building through Gardening



## Building relationships with plants and flowers:

- Sensory exploration
- Noticing the relationship between plants and insects
- Giving plants 'a drink of water' instead of 'watering the plants' - treating plants as our relatives and living beings - not things
- Exploring reciprocal relationships by taking care of a vegetable garden and harvesting their gifts

## Exploring with Rocks



### **Rocks and Water**

Investigating water displacement  
and water movement



### **Exploring:**

Size  
Shape  
Texture  
Weight

**Water painting**  
Cause and effect  
Mindfulness  
Fine motor practice



# Opportunities for children to represent their observations and learning

## Insect Representations

Insect silhouettes

Small sticks

Small stones

Shells

Corks

Small pieces of bark



## Connection to Numeracy:

How many legs does a bee have?  
How many wings?

## Pond/beach investigations

Mixing sensory materials (sand and water)

Do some animals live in both water and on land?



## Insect Home investigations

What have we learned from our exploration of the land?  
Where do insects live?

Adding books to incorporate literacy into children's play



## Exploring with flowers

- Noticing the differences and similarities between flowers
- Colour, shape, texture, smell
- Bottles for creating bouquets



# What we Learned from Summer

## Successes

- Water play, water play, water play! Engaging for children and helps us keep cool
- Easy to utilize most play materials outdoors with summer weather
- Many plants and insects to explore and interact with
- Growing a garden together with the children: opportunities to discuss growth, gratitude and ways to give back (giving plants a drink of water), harvesting vegetables to eat, observing how our garden sustains other life (bees and butterflies)
- Most transitions are smooth and quick during this time
- Eating outdoors! Enjoying meals together while observing visitors to the playground (birds)
- Asking parents to provide swimsuits and extra changes of clothes to support water play

## Challenges

- Dealing with the heat and exposure to the sun: expressing gratitude for the trees and forest area for shade and relief from the heat
- Heat alerts/ Air quality advisory begin unable to go outside
- Extra time, effort, and materials needed to sustain the garden
- Extra time to change from wet clothes due to water play





# Movement: Fall Equinox

Transition from Summer to Fall



# Exploring Fall

# SELEC Toddlers: Fall



Collecting treasures/leaves, pinecones, sticks, rocks, etc.

Exploring with leaves looking at the colors, types and sizes

# Creating Art with Nature



Painting bark with rollers and pine needles

Mural painting with pine needles



Making collages with leaves

# Exploring in the Field and Under the Trees



Investigating environments



Physical gross motor/Running down the hill



Sensory exploration Gathering and throwing leaves



Sensory exploration with pine needles



Risky play role modeling

# SELEC Preschool: Fall



Leaves are a natural cushion for the 'risky play' adventures, rain or shine the children are always challenging themselves.

# The Gift of Fall Leaves



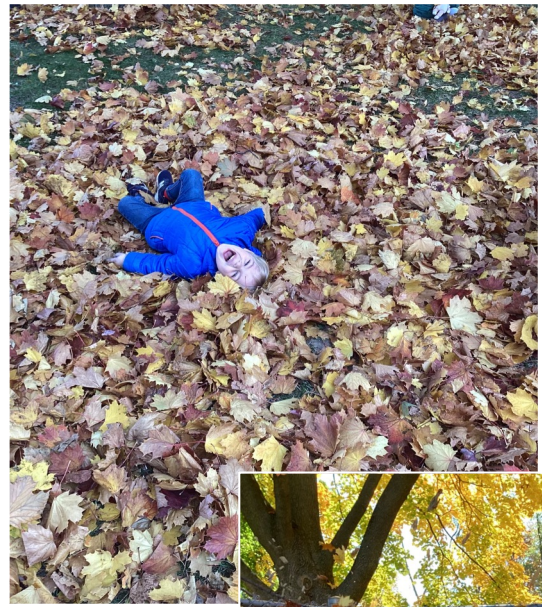
Biodiversity sheet - identifying trees from their leaves



*If You Find A Leaf* by Aimée Sicuro: Encouraging creative thinking with leaves



There is an abundance of fallen leaves - the trees' 'gift' to us



Grab your rakes and shovels, let the children create piles of leaves. Once they're done enjoy some time exploring, running and jumping into them! Save some for later to sort through size and colour.







Add Cedar branches, pine leaves, pinecones and leaves to the Dramatic area and Sensory table. Crushing up the cedar and pine leaves releases an aroma that we have learned are calming to our senses. Cedar, represents one of the sacred medicines from the Ojibwe Medicine Wheel/Sacred Circle.

<https://edgeofthebush.ca/a-seasonal-pedagogy/>

# What we Learned from Fall

## Successes

- Embracing and appreciating the rain
- Layers, muddy buddies and proper rainwear allowed for us to enjoy playing and learning in the rain
- Hearing the children explain that they are dirty “that it’s okay that I am dirty because I enjoyed myself while I was playing”
- Enjoying and appreciating all the opportunities the falling leaves give us

## Challenges

- Extra time getting dressed and undressed/ having to change clothes
- Wet and dirty clothes/ laundry
- Unpredictable weather/ not being able to go outside
- Water play in cooler weather/ cold cramping hands

A blue-tinted photograph of a snowy forest path. The path is covered in snow and leads through a dense forest of trees whose branches are heavily laden with snow. Several wooden benches are visible along the path. The overall scene is serene and wintry.

# Relationships: Winter Solstice

Transition from Fall to Winter



## Exploring Winter

# SELEC Toddlers: Winter

## Sensory Exploration

Observing large ice block with magnifying glass



Snowballs and food coloring



Aquarium/sea animals



Exploring with snow, sand, tree branches and loose parts

## Sensory Exploration



Smell/frozen strawberries,  
cedar, tangerine slices and  
flowers



Visual/ice shapes and things inside  
the ice.



Creating ice blocks with  
containers/different shapes  
and sizes



Tactile: Aquarium/sea animals

# Physical Gross/Fine Motor



Rolling snowballs/creating a snowman

Creating snow piles and sliding over the snow pile



Walking over the snow

Filing milk crates with snow/using loose parts containers and shovels



## Physical Gross/Fine Motor

Sliding over the snow mountain



Pulling and pushing the sled

## Cognitive/Representation

Creating a snowmen with milk crate, yogurt container, tree branches and pinecones



Making/Throwing snowballs







Scooping soil and exploring with different nature materials



Lying down on the hill observing and discussing nature. What do you hear? What do you see? What kind of weather do we have today?



Observing a frozen dandelion



Decorating the large snowball with nature

# SELEC Preschool: Winter

## Mud Exploration

Embrace the mud! Those muddy days are a perfect time to make mud art! Paintbrushes or cedar branches, their choice - watch them make those mud marks!

Children have also created 3D art with the mud using sticks and rocks. Others have taken the muffin trays and used the mud for mud cupcakes.





## Ice Exploration

Embrace the cold/muddy days. Making ice blocks and adding different materials in them allows the children to observe what happens over night in the cold

# Snow Blocks and Winter Building



Snow provides many creative opportunities to explore building and science ideas

Filling large containers supports cooperation between large groups of children



Bringing playdough outside provides endless exploration possibilities. I.e prints, addition to dramatic play and cause and effect with snow and colder temperatures.





The winter months can be slippery, but that hasn't stopped the children from pushing those healthy body boundaries. The children have used the planks and stumps as slides or teeter-totters and they've gotten creative over the winter months to keep the body going.

When given the opportunity to climb, the children have grown to problem solve on ways to get up, with or without assistance. The different height levels have challenged their boundaries, building that relationship with the educators to vocalize when they need some support.





The children and educators had their fun with snowball fights, but the snowballs have also been a great addition to colour exploration or dramatic play 'food'. We have learned about the different snow textures: packing snow makes firm snowballs that you can pat onto the tree to create faces. Fluffier snow is great for nature soup and sledding.

# Building Relationships with Birds



Learning how to be a respectful bird watcher through experience - What do the birds do if we are loud? Quiet?



Using our senses: Can we identify birds by their songs?

Incorporating books about local birds can help children become familiar with their winged neighbours







Help support local songbirds and increase your chances of bird sightings by making and setting up bird feeders.

Discussion question: What do birds eat?



Discussion questions:  
What do birds do in the winter? Especially when it gets cold outside.



A cardinal visiting the bird feeder...



A small world setup with bird puppets nearby...

A smile and a connection with the visiting cardinal begins...



# What we Learned from Winter

## Successes

- Water experiments > freezing activities overnight
- Children adapting each day
- Muddy buddies
- Conversations of animals in the winter: nature sighting: birds, coyotes, animals prints in the snow
- Different 'risky play' explorations: slippery trees
- Finding different ways to go sledding: cardboard box, tarp, plastic covering
- Countless opportunities for gross motor exploration

## Challenges

- Cold temperatures: mittens, children can't hold materials
- Limitations on sensory due to illnesses/making individual bags for children
- Muddy buddies: multiple layering consumes time and makes it difficult for children to walk
- Getting darker earlier



# Passing: Spring Equinox

Transition from Winter to Spring



# Exploring Spring

# SELEC Toddlers: Spring



Planting and Watering  
onion sprouts.

Exploring with bark



Climbing and balancing on the  
tree branches



Creating sounds  
with loose parts



Sensory exploration - grass,  
soil, bark and animals



## Toddlers Playground Sensory Setups



Sensory exploration - grass, soil and pinecones



Exploring with soil, insects, rocks, pinecones and sticks



Science area/magnifying glasses, nature materials



Cognitive/counting animals and representation

## Gardening with Toddlers

The spring season provides children with the opportunity to care for nature; from planting seeds to watering and observing the plants' growth and blossom. At a young age, children are building relationships with plants and will learn about the reciprocity of a garden (caring for the garden, then enjoying their flowers and vegetables in return) through this process.





Developing social skills/Making friends



Creating art with mud, sticks and pinecones

SELEC Preschool

## Discovering new life in spring



Nature walks: explore the different stages of flowers in the spring

Often new flowers appear each week!



Noticing 'baby plants' in our planters

**Planting perennial/native plants** - children can recall the same plant year-to-year, learn how they support pollinators/the environment

“Remember those purple flowers the bees and butterflies loved?”

# The Gifts of Dandelion Season



Dandelions are everywhere in the spring! Children can collect them in baskets, observe their lifecycle from tiny plant to fluffy seeds - which happens relatively quickly

The children's collections can be added to play experiences (freezing them keeps them fresh longer)

They also make great tools for art - dandelion painting



# Building relationships with insects



Thinking about how to interact with these small creatures without hurting them  
“Bugs are tiny! We are giants to them.”



Noticing where insects like to live and when we can see them (ex. Snails come out in the rain)

Children often build the snails a ‘safe’ home on and off the playground



# What we Learned from Spring

## Successes

- Noticing small changes in the land - 'baby plants', increased bird activity, finding insects
- Enjoying the rain - puddles, gratitude for water, listening to thunderstorms from inside
- Beginning our garden, planting seeds
- Muddy buddies for protecting clothing
- Gratitude for warmer weather and the green coming back to the land

## Challenges

- Unpredictable weather
- Keeping things dry
- Water play in cooler weather - cold hands/wet mittens
- Amount of laundry from rainy and muddy weather

# Love for Trees

Throughout their tree exploration, the children have grown to understand the difference of thicker branches vs. thin branches; which is safer to climb and explore and which ones to be given gentle care. It has opened the conversation of what trees give us: shade, shelter and what we can give back: water, replanting, hugs



# Incorporating the *The Dish with One Spoon Treaty*

Within the Seasonal Pedagogy / Land-Based learning philosophy it is crucial to approach interactions with the land with a sense of responsibility, stewardship, gratitude and reciprocity.

We keep in mind the covenants of *The Dish with One Spoon Treaty*:

“The “dish” represents the land that is to be shared peacefully and the “spoon” represents the individuals living on and using the resources of the land in a spirit of mutual co-operation” (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020).



# *The Dish with One Spoon* Treaty Covenants

1. Only take what you need (earthtotables.org, n.d).
1. Don't take the first one (earthtotables.org, n.d).
  - Ex. don't take the first dandelion you see).
1. Never take the last one, leave enough for others (earthtotables.org, n.d):
  - leaving flowers/plants for the bees/butterflies/insects/animals.
1. Keep the 'dish' clean: leaving the land better than when you found it. (earthtotables.org, n.d)
1. No sharp objects can be used to eat from the dish: there should be no violence or conflict as everyone needs to share the land to survive (Future Cities Canada, n.d)

Learn more:

<https://earthtotables.org/essays/haudenosaunee-gifts/>

<https://futurecitiescanada.ca/portal/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/02/fcc-civic->





# Outdoor Learning Materials

## Large loose parts

- Tires
- Spools
- Large sticks and branches
- Large blocks
- Planks
- Logs
- Large containers
- Milk crates

## Small loose parts

- Pinecones
- Sticks
- Fallen cedar/pine branches (cut up)
- Corks
- Bark
- Bottle caps
- Cardboard pieces
- Wood cookies and cut wood pieces
- Stones, rocks, pebbles
- Shells
- Leaves
- Moss
- Cut up fallen cedar and pine branches/sumac

## Other materials

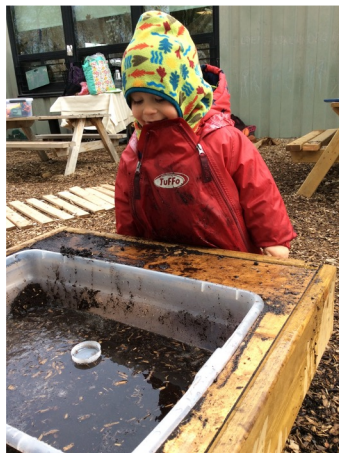
- Magnifying glasses
- Biodiversity identification sheets from Guelph University Arboretum
- Baskets for collecting
- Binoculars

# Tips and Tricks

1. If the **educators are enjoying their time outside** (in all sorts of weather), the children will follow. They will engage and build connections to their environment more freely if their educators are right there with them. Co-learning has been crucial for our program!
2. **Check the weather daily** - plan out your week with weather in mind (but also remember that the weather is often unpredictable). Muddy buddies are a game changer! Some activities are not suited for rainy days or extra cold days, some activities may be difficult for the children to participate in with mittens.
3. **Embrace flexibility!** That unpredictable weather is also an opportunity to explore with the children.

## Tips and Tricks

4. **Freedom for children to mix materials and incorporate materials from all areas** together/bringing materials outside the playground with us
5. **Seek out educational resources on how to dress for the weather** (i.e layering) and share these resources with parents.
6. Wearing **muddy buddies** offers extra protection from weather and water. It also protects children's clothing and snowsuits during messy play and prevents families from dealing with large amounts of laundry every week.



Don't be afraid to get messy!



From Dr. Hopi Martin:

“We say Land is First because Mother Earth is first, she was here first, she gives us everything we need to survive and it’s because of her that we’re here and so it’s the lessons she was here first...she gives us everyday through all the four seasons (Martin, 2020, 4:40).

“what if we consider these Four Foundations [from HDLD?] in a different way....consider them in movement with each other. This would give us a method for supporting our children, and helping them to live in harmony with the earth, rather than in obstruction to it. As a starting point, think about this concept of land as first teacher and reflect on what we can learn from Mother Earth. And consider this as a good beginning or foundation for living a good life” (Martin, n.d, para. 15).