

# Flourishing in Nature

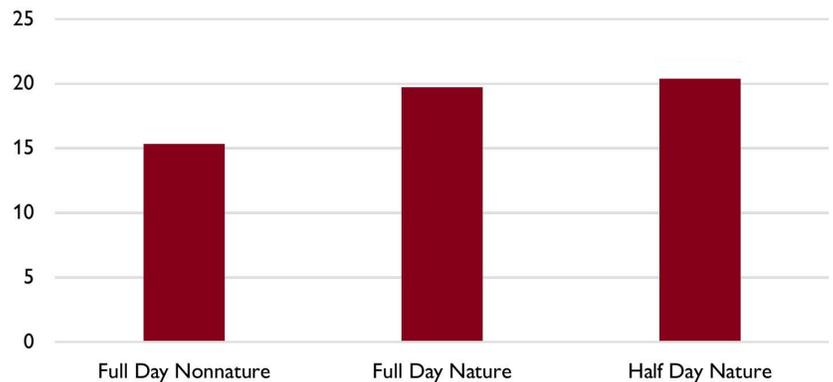
## Investigating the Impact of Nature Preschools on Young Children's Physical Activity

**Overview.** Preschools and other early learning and care settings are influential in the promotion of physical activity for young children. **Higher levels of physical activity have been positively associated with mental health, academic achievement, and motor development.** It is important to establish healthy physical activity routines at a young age, yet many young children are not sufficiently active, particularly in childcare settings. Time outdoors and extended free play, as offered by nature preschools, are two emerging characteristics associated with increased physical activity. **The purpose of this study was to explore the potential for nature preschools to promote young children's physical activity in childcare settings, particularly in northern climates.** Five nature preschools (98 participants) and three non-nature preschools (56 participants) participated in the study. Physical activity was measured by tracking participants step counts using Yamax Digiwalker Pedometers over a five-day period at the end of October and again at the end of February.



Image Credit: Secret Forest Playschool, MN

Average Steps/Minute Across Participating Preschools (October)



**Results:** Nature preschools supported children's achievement of the targeted range of daily step-based physical activity. Children in the half-day and full-day nature preschools were significantly more active than children in the non-nature programs in late October; children in the half-day nature program were significantly more active than children in the full-day nature and nonnature programs in February.

**Conclusion.** The results of this study suggest the potential for nature preschools to positively impact children's seasonal physical activity, even in wet, cold, and snowy months. The extended amount of unstructured play (as opposed to teacher-led physical activity), along with outdoor play that occurs in and with nature (as opposed to on fixed playground equipment) are notable characteristics of the physical activity afforded by nature preschools. This study demonstrates the value of nature preschools in helping children meet recommended daily physical activity and build healthy habits, countering the general decline in children's physical activity and outdoor playtime across seasonal changes, particularly in northern latitudes.

