

# AfterSchool

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Today

## RECONNECTING

CHILDREN with NATURE

INTERNATIONAL  
LEARNING EXCHANGE

OUTWARD BOUND  
The POWER of NATURE

PLAY & LEARNING  
in the OUTDOORS

# DISCOVERY

# CHILDREN'S CENTRE

The importance of outdoors and youth development. | BY AMY L CHARLES



Ron Blatz, executive director of Discovery Children's Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, discovered his early childhood education interest rather by accident.

"There is a significant female behind how most men got involved in the early childhood sector," Blatz said. "A friend started a child care center, and one weekend gave me a call and asked if I would consider taking a job at her center. I needed a job, so I took it." Thus began discovering the absolute joy of working with and around children. As a farm boy, Blatz had never babysat or really been involved with children. "This interest and aptitude sat there fairly hidden from me."



Discovery Children's Centre commenced in 1976, and Blatz has been there all but two years of that time. It's Manitoba's largest single-site child care center, with more than three hundred enrolled, and it's making an impression. Extended hours serve those who don't work typical hours. And the staff isn't typical, either.

"You'll likely find no other center in Canada with eleven men within its workforce," said Blatz. "We've become the name and face of men in Manitoba's early childhood education movement—sometimes beyond. We truly believe gender balance is good for young children. With twenty-five percent of our staff male, we've found ways to put that into action."

Outdoors is an area in which the Centre shines. Children arriving early in the morning assist staff with setup: preparing the sheltered snack area, bringing out toys for the sand-digging and dirt-digging pits, and more. Actual "toys" are few, but "loose parts" such as tree stumps, balls, lumber, driftwood, ropes, bed sheets, and rubber tires foster creating, building, and inventing. "Their minds are so active when given open-ended materials to explore with," Blatz notes, "that there is rarely a problem with boredom."

Over the past decade, staff learned they were the biggest obstacles to spending more time outdoors. "We need to embrace the

outdoors and dress appropriately, so we are not the reason children are staying inside so much. We need to keep reminding ourselves we are there for the children, not our own comfort." After admitting and addressing this issue staff saw a tripling of outdoor time, with great benefits for the program and children.

Involvement with the World Forum Foundation swept the Centre up in the movement to connect children to nature. "We're at the leading edge of this international movement, in our province, and have changed our program a lot over the past eight to ten years. We've started a Two Week Outdoor challenge and have been pleased to see dozens of programs across Western Canada join us in this unique venture."

During two summer break weeks, youth are outside for two weeks straight, from drop-off time to pick-up time. (They head indoors for restrooms or when lightning is in the area.) "The children love these two weeks and the staff are invigorated as well. It has really brought back some great memories of their own childhoods, for many of the staff."

Children seem happier and healthier when outside more. "We see this especially with children who struggle with attention issues. The side effects of these challenges seem to almost disappear in the larger, more

peaceful environment the outdoors provides. When we finally get children out of their classroom 'cages,' they seem to thrive."

They love the opportunity to play with friends. "Many of our children will be the only child in their family, so this is a real gift to them. In our city it has become rare for families to allow their children to play outside of their yards unattended, so this is even more critical in this day and age." They also love the relationships they have with other caring men and women.


Blatz is proud of the outward-looking Discovery Children's Centre. "If we can help others we do so, just because it matters to others." There is absolutely no "what's in it for me" approach to work.

"The award-winning author Richard Louv tells us that if you ask a group of mothers how many of them played outside every day when they were children, seventy percent will raise their hands. If the same group is asked how many of their children play outside every day, only twenty-six percent will raise their hands.

"For our children's mental and physical health, we need to help reverse this dangerous trend. Fifty-plus hours weekly in front of a screen is more than enough. We need to bring balance back to children's lives—and we continue to make the outdoor playtime a big priority." •

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