

Nurturing Students, Naturally

Tom Brady,
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Bye, bye, Baby Mozart, and all those other high-tech boys that were supposed to make the first all-digital generation so smart. Blocks, books and the great outdoors may be the best learning tools of all.

Fiddleheads Forest School students in Seattle spend four hours a day, even when it rains, which it does a lot in the Pacific Northwest, in forest “classroom” among the cedar trees of the University of Washington

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Botanic Garden. It’s about 10 kilometres from Microsoft, so while the children roam the rainy woods, many of their parents sit in front of computers all day engaged in the digital future.

Fiddleheads is a part of a trend that emphasizes outdoor play, even in bad weather. The Times reported, The Natural Start Alliance now counts 92 schools spend a large chunk of each day outside.

The children at Fiddleheads are supervised by trained teachers, but choose their own outdoor adventures. They make letters out of sticks or cart rocks in wheelbarrows. One day, they looked at earthworms in an empty toy watering can, and talked about what kind of homes earthworms like.

“We kind of just think and find what we want to do in our heard, and we just do it,” Stelyn Carter, 5, told The Times. One of her preferred activities, she said, is to “be quiet and listen to birds – crows, owls and chickadees.”

There are rules, and Stelyn explains them: “If we see a bug, we are careful not to step on it. If we see a pretty leaf, we pick it up and

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put it in our magic spot.”

Babies may not be ready for outdoor classes, but a study found that playing with electronic toys that were supposed to promote language did not work as advertised. Parents spoke less and responded less to babies’ babbling than when playing with electronic toys.

“When you put the gadgets and gizmos in, the parents stop talking,” Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple University, told the Times, “What you get is more behavioural regulation stuff, like ‘don’t touch that’ or ‘do this’, or nothing because the books and toys take it over for you.”

She added, “A toy should be 10 percent toy and 90 percent child, and with a lot of these electronic toys, the toy takes over 90 percent and the child just fills in the blanks.”

And it’s not just infants and young children who benefit from a traditional approach to learning. Consider Union City, New Jersey, which like its neighbouring city Newark had failing schools for decades. But then Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg

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gave \$100 million to Newark’s schools in 2010.

Today, Union City’s schools are performing better.

The schools district there, led by Fred Carrigg, faced two challenges head on: They

taught more classes in Spanish so the three quarters of their students who were learning English did not fall farther behind. They turned youngsters, many of whom came from homes without books, into capable readers.

Teachers tried hands-on learning and group projects. To get students excited about books, the schools assigned daily reading and writing assignments, even in subjects like arts and science.

Meanwhile, Newark spent tens of millions on outside consultants.

“The real story of Union City is that it didn’t fall back,” Mr. Carrigg told the Times. “It stabilized and has continued to improve.”