

WHY CAN NATURE BE SO IMPORTANT IN THE LIFE A CHILD WITH AUTISM?

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Over the past 45 years of my professional career working with children with developmental disabilities, I have had many opportunities to observe, teach and be with this special population in a variety of learning environments. The learning environment which I have been so impressed is nature and the benefits it has for children on the autism spectrum.

Taking a sabbatical leave from East Carolina University for two years in the nineties, I returned to the classroom to teach preschool children with developmental disabilities including those with autism on an island in the Pacific. The small building where my preschool was located was encased in a natural environment, even having the ocean a stone's throw away. It was there I began to observe what a difference being outside of the four walls of the classroom in nature made to the development of the child with special needs.

Almost 20 years later, I have again had the opportunity of observing children with autism interacting with nature. For the last two years I have volunteered at Camp Crinkleroot, a day camp program for children on the autism spectrum conducted by Appalachian State University. Along with this over the past four years, my wife and I have hosted children on autism spectrum and their families here at our cabin on 25 acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Boone, NC. I am now even more firmly convinced of the value nature has in the development of the child on the autism spectrum.

With the latest statistics being released in March of 2012, the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 88 children in the United States are being diagnosed with autism--nearly doubling of the prevalence since the CDC began tracking these numbers --autism can be now officially be declared an epidemic in the United States. When I began my career in Special Education in the sixties the ratio was 1 in 2000!! Being a program developer, not a biological scientist, I find there is a crucial need to develop programs for this population.

Having the conviction of the values and benefits that the nature environment provides for children on the autism spectrum, KAMPN (Kids with Autism Making Progress in Nature) was incorporated on May 1, 2011, receiving its nonprofit 501(c)(3) status on that same date. KAMPN will be a family affair with siblings and parents being involved with the experience. It is not only for the child with autism. Parents and siblings need to be a part of it in order to see just how valuable and fun being together, sharing and trying something new can be. It is projected to begin operation in July of 2013.

There have been innumerable articles written and much research conducted over the past several years emphasizing the benefits for the body, mind and spirit that the outdoor natural environment has for all children. More recently focus is developing on what this rich natural environmental setting can mean to a child on the autism spectrum. One can easily find them in several journals and publications on the subject.