

***Child of Nature—
Benefits of Nature
in Childhood***

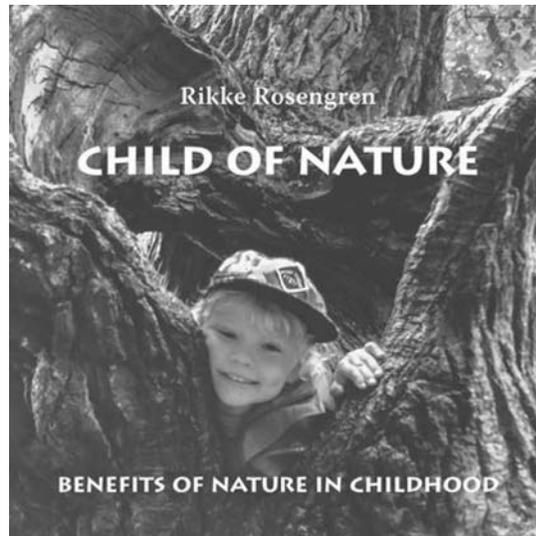
Rikke Rosengren
(Blue Pearl, 2018)

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

Outdoor early childhood programs have been growing in number and popularity as an educational choice for many years now. Already common in Scandinavia and encouraged to our North American kindergartens by Helle Heckmann's example in Denmark, the number of outdoor programs on this continent has exploded with the pandemic. Out of necessity, many, many Waldorf programs have made the outdoors—forest, outside play yard, or even city park—their classrooms in order to stay in session during this pandemic. Now, after two years, this outdoor style is being affirmed as so beneficial for the children that programs will remain centered outside even when a return to the classroom is a safe option.

Children are thriving and teachers are happy, too, even with taxing weather extremes and practical, logistical challenges. Research affirms many benefits from more time in nature, which is no surprise. But seeing this shift can make some who have taught in the Waldorf kindergarten for many years feel like the world of our sheltering, aesthetically sculpted classrooms is being stood on its head. How to not get dizzy?

The new book *Child of Nature—Benefits of Nature in Childhood* is an accessible and teacher/family/care provider-friendly companion that can help with exploring these thoughts and questions. This book was published in pre-COVID 2018. It is not a justification for what early childhood classes



have done to stay in person during the pandemic. On the contrary, it is a practical, sensible, joyous celebration of utilizing the gifts of nature no matter what our setting and circumstances and thus nurturing and nourishing young children in the first seven years of life in body, soul, and spirit.

Bonsai (meaning “little tree” in Japanese) is the name of the program author Rikke Rosengren founded near Copenhagen in 1999 with 40 children total in the

nursery groups. Kindergarten groups were added a few years later. Enrollment now stands at 130 children with three nurseries and four kindergartens. The book describes what the children have experienced in their interactions with nature, and includes current research to further confirm that being in nature as much as possible offers enormous benefit to the children's healthy development. (Would that the Danish sources were also readily available in English for us to share with colleagues and families as well!)

The book is organized into chapters that together describe the essential elements we recognize in Waldorf early childhood education as support for healthy physical, sensory, and social development—free, active bodily movement; abundant opportunity for play; experiencing the environment and the elements through all the senses; rhythm; chances for risk-taking toward developing flexibility, resiliency, and self-confidence; and worthy role models for imitation. The children also need to see and participate in practical life with others in community. Into the rhythm of the week are also woven artistic activities—drawing, painting, older children wood carving with a knife, and so on.

This overview of Waldorf early education basics is done with clear and articulate vocabulary. As I read the book, I found I had been led through a well-reasoned description of a Waldorf early childhood program that could take place anywhere. Rikke describes the children's daily experiences in a simple yet vivid and accessible ways that are always accurate, truth-filled and objective. I highly recommend this book as a resource giving examples of how we can speak about our work to people outside of the Waldorf community and to families new to Waldorf education.

As mentioned above, the book includes many references to brain development and the advantages that an outdoor environment offers for exploration, varied sensory experiences, and so on, with current research quoted to back up these claims. For example, the Danish brain scientist Kjeld Fredens is noted for his support for children having time in nature. The following applies to children in all environments.

According to Fredens, sensory impacts are vital in regard to how the brain is stimulated and we are not able to sense anything without some kind of movement. When children are in nature, it is natural to them to move around—nature calls for the children to move, and thus, they get a lot of the varied sensory experiences with which nature is so saturated. . . Children need to be in movement, which the child is a natural part of, [and] is valuable and developmental for the child's body and learning. For the small child, it is especially through play that the integration between movements, senses and cognitive development takes place; a learning that is integrated into the whole body. (p. 36-7)

Brain development, movement, play, and sensory experience are shown to be essential partners in this brief statement.

My own school is urban with a major boulevard running along one side and a large park on the opposite. The park has open space and trees, but it is no forest. Rather than closing the book feeling discouraged by the limitations of our setting, I was surprised and delighted to find I felt inspired and energized instead. Nature is just outside our doors. It is up to us to consciously look at what we do have, and maximize the possibilities for bringing the trees and flowers into our classrooms through imaginative stories that describe their lives through the seasons. We can look to our outside space and imagine varied possibilities for movement that bring fun and call for a little daring, and so on.

A paragraph from the introduction summarizes the intention of this book.

The main parts of the book are based on our adventures in, experiences from, and reflections about the Bonsai kindergarten. The book addresses everybody working with children, who has an interest in creating an environment where children have opportunities to nurture their relationship to nature and, thus, their relation to themselves. The book is envisioned as one proposal on how to use nature as a context for educational work with children—not as a recipe, but as a selection that the reader can get inspired by and use to a greater or lesser extent. (p. 21)

With abundant gorgeous photographs, this book is a feast for the eyes. It overflows with reminders of the wonder, healthy challenge, and benevolence that arises from daily interactions with the natural world. The forest has its unique advantages, to be sure. But for city dwellers, *Child of Nature* can also open our eyes to the unnoticed possibilities of interacting with nature in our own environment as well. ♦