COEO’s Landmark Research Summary: 
Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education 

by Grant Linney

Over the past year, Andrea Foster (our first full-time employee thanks to funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation) reviewed a wide array of current and international research into the multiple, powerful and lasting outcomes produced through utilizing outdoor and experiential education (OEE) as a key learning methodology. As co-authors, Andrea and I produced an 80-page document that reports the findings according to COEO’s four stated values, namely, education for curriculum and community, character, wellbeing, and environment.

Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education also highlights “OEE in Action” descriptions of particular programs such as secondary school interdisciplinary studies, wilderness adventure pursuits, and urban-based activities including the exploration of local neighbourhoods and school ground greening projects. The publication features a professional layout and numerous great colour photographs of students powerfully connecting with themselves, others and their natural surroundings through outdoor learning. In addition to outlining exemplary examples of government leadership in establishing and making effective use of OEE, it also provides a number of evidence-based recommendations to the Ontario government as well as to Canadian postgraduate schools.

This is a landmark publication whose time has come. It is clear that OEE is needed now more than ever before. However, OEE will only assume its rightful place in educating for our future if we can convince our political leaders and many others of its value through the promotion of solid outcomes-based research. We hope that, through its widespread distribution, Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education will contribute significantly to current discussions about making today’s youth more active and comfortable in the outdoors, more confident about themselves and their interactions with others, and more connected through their hands, heart and mind to the natural life support systems of this planet.

Executive Summary of Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education

Outdoor and Experiential Education (OEE) is a vital learning methodology for today’s children and young people. Its provision of safe, educator-framed and hands-on experiences in outdoor settings provides unique, vital and lasting benefits in terms of education for curriculum and community, education for character, education for wellbeing and education for environment. This document is a compelling synthesis of a wide variety of current outcomes-based research. It offers concrete evidence as to why OEE should become an essential and publicly funded part of education for the future.

OEE relates curricula to real-life situations. Research shows that students using OEE and the local environment as a comprehensive focus and framework for curricula demonstrate

• increased engagement with and enthusiasm for learning
• improved academic performance, including better language skills
• greater sense of pride and ownership in accomplishments
• a variety of substantially increased critical thinking skills.

OEE promotes lifelong physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. A growing body of studies suggests that

• contact with nature is as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep
• time spent outdoors correlates with increased physical activity and fitness in children
exposure to green space reduces crime and
increases individuals’ general wellbeing
and ability to focus
• children as young as five have shown a
significant reduction in the symptoms of
Attention Deficit Disorder when they are
engaged in outdoor activities in natural
settings.

OEE educates for character. It provides
powerful opportunities for extensive personal
and interpersonal growth, particularly when
trained outdoor educators are involved in all
aspects of the program. Major research studies
have found that
• many character traits are significantly
enhanced as a result of OEE experiences,
including creativity, enthusiasm, self-
motivation, self-understanding,
assertiveness, maturity, independence and
self-confidence
• many social skills are also enhanced
through OEE experiences, including
cooperation, effective communication,
decision making, problem solving, task
leadership and social competence
• OEE promotes marked improvements in
behaviour for special populations such as
at-risk youth. Retention and continued
growth in these areas is also evident as a
result of such hands-on experiences.

Finally, and in COEO’s opinion most
importantly, OEE directly exposes children
and youth to the natural environment in
ways that develop powerful, knowledgeable
and lifelong connections essential for a
healthy and sustainable future. Leading
Canadians such as Robert Bateman, Thomas
Homer-Dixon and David Suzuki all strongly
agree and are quoted in this document.

Research also shows that
• children who have early, sequenced and
repeated experiences in the outdoors
develop a kinship with nature that can
evolve into an informed, proactive and
lifelong stewardship of the natural
environment
• there are great benefits in the use of
outdoor education methodologies for
environmental education purposes
• children love to be part of the solution —
especially when they are able to see the
effects of their positive interaction with
nature first-hand.

As a result of these findings, The Council of
Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) urges
government, parents, volunteer leaders and
other community members to actively reclaim
the outdoors as a safe, fulfilling and essential
part of growing up in this province and
beyond.

COEO also makes the following major
recommendations to the Ontario government:
1. Formally recognize the value of OEE as a
unique and powerful learning
methodology that particularly addresses
the pressing need of education for
environment as well education for
character, wellbeing and curriculum.
2. Develop a comprehensive across-all-grades
sequence of school-based outdoor
activities that addresses the four values of
OEE and particularly education for
environment.
3. Provide funding to school boards so that
every student is assured a minimum of
two one-day OEE programs and one five-
day OEE program at recognized outdoor
education centres.
4. Mandate that OEE is a recognized area of
specialization at Primary, Junior,
Intermediate and Senior levels in all
Ontario faculties of education.

Postgraduate schools of Canadian universities
are also urged to promote further Canadian-
based research into the various powerful and
lasting benefits of OEE for all elementary and
secondary school students.

For more information about Reconnecting
Children through Outdoor Education, including
details about how to order single or multiple
copies, go to www.coeo.org/news.htm.

Grant Linney teaches at the Upper Canada
College Norval Outdoor School. He refuses
to retire because he is having too good a time.