

ROOTED IN PLAY: The Power of Place

A Conference for Early Childhood Educators — Pre-service and Current



May 3-4, 2024

Touch of Nature Outdoor Education Center

Experience Place-Based Education in a nature inspired environment.

This is an experiential conference focusing on a place-based approach. This conference will provide information and hands-on learning opportunities to support participants, whether you are a novice, an experimenter or an expert in your journey. Breakout sessions will engage you in these practices and provide application strategies.

The conference is being held **Friday, May 3, to Saturday, May 4, 2024**, at the **Touch of Nature Outdoor Education Center** in **Carbondale, Illinois**. Full conference registration includes two days of conference events; single-day registration is available Friday or Saturday.

- Professional Development Credit for Illinois Professional Educator License
- Gateway Registry and CEU approved conference

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

SHEILA WILLIAMS RIDGE



Sheila Williams Ridge is the mother of four and the Director of the University of Minnesota Child Development Laboratory School. She has an EdD in Education Leadership, an MA in Education, and a BA in Biology. Sheila teaches courses at the University of Minnesota and Hamline University including Nature-Based Learning in Early Childhood, A Sense of Wonder, Equity and Inclusion in Environmental Education, and Student Teaching Seminar in Early Childhood. She is also co-author of the book, *Nature-Based Learning for Young Children: Anytime, Anywhere, on Any Budget*, published by Redleaf Press, and several other publications on nature-based learning. She is passionate about encouraging nature-based play and the lasting developmental benefits of a relationship between children and nature.

MARGIE COOPER

Margie Cooper has been seeking insight and influencing change in American education since her early years as an elementary school teacher in Ohio. After obtaining an M.Ed. in early childhood education, she served as administrator and lead teacher at Wright State University's early learning laboratory school. While working there, she earned a second M.Ed. in administration and supervision. She eventually earned a PhD in Early Childhood Education from Ohio State University.



As a founding board member of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA), she brings her passion for the well-being of young children, families, educators, and communities to her roles. In addition to her work as an elementary and preschool educator, Margie has been a preschool co-director, an adjunct professor, an author, and a volunteer in various projects and organizations. She first studied in Reggio Emilia, Italy in 1991, and in the decades since, she has returned to Reggio Emilia nearly annually. She is responsible for the NAREA office, serves as co-representative of NAREA in the Reggio Emilia International Network, and is a founding board member of Fondazione Reggio Children. She is also the founder of Inspired Practices in Early Education, a not-for-profit organization; through Inspired Practices, Margie established Project Infinity, a longstanding collaboration among schools that are inspired by Reggio Emilia.

SPOTLIGHT SPEAKER

JENNIFER ROSINIA

Jennifer Rosinia is an Occupational Therapist and Child Development Specialist. A master clinician and a gifted teacher, Dr. Rosinia has taken a stand for the body specifically the ways in which the neurobiological systems impact relationships, development, and learning. Areas of specialization include sensory processing, the stress response system, adverse childhood experiences and the ways in which experiences in and with nature impact development. Dr. Rosinia is on faculty at the Erikson Institute. Jennifer has a growing national reputation as a powerful speaker and consultant. Dr. Rosinia brings a healthy balance of humor, passion, and expertise to all of her presentations. She is the president of Kid Links Unlimited, Incorporated a company whose mission is to link theory to practice, parents with professionals and kids with their optimal potential.



Event Schedule

Day 1: Friday, May 3

8:00-8:45	Check-in for Conference & Friday Night Lodging Little Grassy Lodge
9:00-9:15	Welcoming/Introduction
9:15-10:15	Keynote: Sheila Williams Ridge
10:30-12:00	Breakout Session #1
12:00-12:45	Lunch
1:00-2:15	Spotlight Speaker: Jennifer Rosinia
2:30-3:45	Breakout Session #2
4:00-4:45	Reflection Activity
5:00-7:30	Vendor Exhibit/Reception/Poster Displays
6:00-7:00	Dinner
7:30-10:00	Evening Activities

Day 2: Saturday, May 4

7:30-8:30	Breakfast & Saturday Check In
8:45-9:30	Team Building Activity
9:45-11:15	Breakout Session #3
11:15-12:15	Lunch
12:30-2:00	Breakout Session #4
2:15-3:15	Closing Keynote: Margie Cooper
3:15	Vendor Giveaways
3:30 – 4:00	Adjourn/Conference Concludes

Welcoming/Introduction Little Grassy Lodge

9:00 – 9:15 am

Friday Keynote: Sheila Williams Ridge

9:15 – 10:15 am

Kinship & Social Emotional Growth

This keynote will focus on the important work in early childhood education and support how adults helping connect children to nature can help them form a deep kinship with nature and a deep connection to themselves and others.

Morning Breakout Session #1

10:30 am

Place Based Learning and Adventuring

Michel Eldridge, The University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

PBL and Adventuring are rooted in progressive education and experiential learning. You will be introduced to this practice and learn more about this model of learning through narratives, photos, and practical experience.

Nature-based emergent curriculum: The power of children & place for planning

Rachel Larimore, Samara Early Learning.

It sounds counterintuitive, but an emergent curriculum requires intentional planning. Especially if the goal is an emergent curriculum that is rooted in play and driven by children's interests. This session will focus on intentional planning that connects play to children's interests, events happening in the natural world, and broader curricular goals.

Forest School without a Forest: Educating Outdoors in the City

Angela Wildermuth, Wilderkids Urban Forest School

Get a snapshot of play-based, forest-school inspired programming in a variety of urban environments with practical tips to overcoming emotional hurdles, seeing hyper-local possibilities, and leaning into risk.

Wild Plants - Foraging with Children

Tracy Stephens & Nora Miller, Creekside Nature School

Rural Champaign County Special Ed Cooperative, Spectrum Program (PFA classroom). Join us in identifying and harvesting local wild edible and medicinal plants safely. We will take a walk, please bring a water bottle and comfortable shoes.

Nature Play: Not Just Woods & White Kids

Kisa Marx, The Play Lab Foundation

Identify the benefits of outdoor learning, examine the systemic barriers standing in the way of equity, and explore actionable changes to provide nature play in any space.

Presence as a Practice

Gabrielle DeLoach, Kodo Kids

In this session, we will understand the impact of presence on child and adult interaction, learn strategies to help center presence in your daily play with children, and be wondrous in our reflection of teaching practices. (Also offered during the Saturday PM session.)

Guardians of Play

Jennifer Rosinia, PhD, OTR

You are invited to become a member of an elite team of early childhood professionals who have been selected for a mission like no other – to protect play! There is a dark force rising up and taking over early childhood that uses developmentally inappropriate practices. Early childhood has come under attack. With an increase demand for academic outcomes at younger ages, an emphasis on assessment and a decrease in play-based learning. Early childhood education is in danger. We need you! In this session you will be given the tools you need to serve as a Guardian of Play. You will be empowered with the knowledge of the research findings related to the importance of play in early childhood education. We will identify ways to educate and encourage parents to become allies in our efforts to protect play based learning. You will work alongside other Guardians to create a play plans that you will be able to take with you back to your galaxy.

Guardians of Play are superheroes! So, whether you've always wanted to be a play superhero or are stumbling into this role because of your love for young children, welcome to the team!

Lunch in Freeburg Hall

12:00 - 12:45 pm

Afternoon SPOTLIGHT Speaker: Jennifer Rosinia

1:00 – 2:15 pm

Sensory Gifts and Challenges of Nature Play**Jennifer Rosinia**, Kid Links Unlimited, Incorporated

It is a well-known fact that young children learn through their senses. And a growing body of research that is finding that being in nature is good for children's growing brains. In this workshop we'll discuss the sensory based gifts and challenges that being with young children in nature settings brings. We'll explore the ways in which sensory experiences in nature settings influences behavior, problem-solving, thinking skills, social competence, and physical development. It's OK if you are not sold on the idea of going out in nature. We'll have some rich discussions about not only the gifts but the challenges as well. Let's have some fun as we consider some intriguing concepts such as why dirt is good for the body and how simply adding green spaces will help to enhance the wellbeing of young children and the people who care for them.

Afternoon Breakout Session #2

2:30 – 3:45 pm

Doing the deep work: Exploring Another Layer of Inside, Outside, & Beyond**Rachel Larimore**, Samara Early Learning

In nature-based pedagogy we typically think of the Inside, Outside, and Beyond as physical locations for learning. This session, however, will explore the Inside, Outside, and Beyond as a metaphor for relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world. This session will explore how we can do the inner work ourselves, as well as support our teams, to show up more fully as educators and teammates.

Creating Art with Beautiful Sustainable Materials**Lisa Daly**, Transforming Early Learning

Learn how children may express their artistic creativity with beautiful, sustainable materials without tape, paint, glue, paper, or tools. Transient art is a wonderful way to reuse existing materials, reduce waste, and lower the amount spent on consumable goods while fostering children's creativity. Additionally, we'll explore how children may create two- and three-dimensional art outdoors with found natural items such as bark, rocks, sticks, flowers, leaves, and seed pods.

"We see the trees but we don't really know them": Embodied place-based inquiry rooted in play**Christie Angelton & Zhao Xiaoying**, Illinois State University

What does it mean to know something, rather than to merely see it? Join us for an interactive, embodied exploration of place-based inquiry rooted in play and literal trees. Note: This session may extend past the session ending time into the reflective activity.

Earthly Wonders**Alex Pafilis-Silverstein & Jola Dohrmann**, Chicago Children's Museum

The session aims to empower educators to foster a rich learning environment by crafting a nature-oriented classroom despite constraints like limited natural light, outdoor areas, and a modest budget. (Also offered in the Saturday PM session.)

It's OK to be Nervous When Integrating Nature Experiences in Early Childhood for the First Time**Jenn Thrasher**, Wild Tykes

Trying something new can be nerve-racking, especially when you are responsible for the lives of young children. This presentation will empower you to continuously integrate nature into your curriculum.

Build & Facilitate Experiences with Goals, Purpose and Meaning: On the Trail, at the Heart of Experience**Stephen Gariepy**, SIU STEM Education Research Center

Join the presenter for an immersive educational experience on the Rocky Ledges Educational Trail considering techniques for and challenges of outdoor experiential education. Note: This session may extend past the session ending time into the reflective activity.

Nature and the Power of Observation**Nancy Gulley**, Southern Illinois University, Southern Region Early Childhood Programs

Explore all the wonders that nature has to offer! Learn how nature offers the opportunity for exploration and wonder to preschool children as they learn how to focus and observe details in nature. Participants will examine the power of observation through observation of nature materials and learn how careful observation and journaling can lead to wonder and excitement of learning across multiple learning domains.

Afternoon Activities

4:00-7:30 pm

Reflective Activity

4:00 – 4:45 pm

Vendor Exhibit/Reception/Poster Displays

5:00 – 7:30 pm

Dinner

6:00 – 7:00 pm

Evening Activities

7:30 – 10:00 pm

Paint 'n' Sip

Night Hike

Make It/Take It

Bonfire

More details soon!

Day 2: Saturday, May 4

Breakfast & Day 2 Check In – Freeburg Hall

7:30 – 8:30 am

Team Building Activities

8:45 – 9:30 am

Morning Breakout Session #3

9:45 – 11:15 am

Reggio Emilia Inspiration: Thoughts on the Language of Drawing**Margie Cooper**, Inspired Practices in Early Education.

Children and adults explore, experiment, and enlarge competences through a constellation of human endowments for imagining, learning, expressing, and communicating. Coined “the hundred languages” by Loris Malaguzzi, pedagogical originator of Reggio Emilia’s municipal system of early childhood care and education, this interactive session will explore drawing as one of the human languages.

Embracing Fire as a Loose Parts: Safely Exploring Fire Play with Children

Carla Gull, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College Explore the potential of fire as a loose part, as well as needed safety parameters needed for fire play. In this practical, exploratory session, lean into fire as part of risky play, skill building, and safety awareness!

Feeling Safe in Nature: Facilitating a child’s emotional resilience through the cultivation of curiosity and wonder within nature**Rebecca Molitor**, Compassionate Growth Counseling & Early Intervention/Child & Family Connections #2.

The intersection of nature and healing is well documented. Can you imagine being a facilitator of this healing experience for young children? In this presentation you will immerse yourself in nurturing the brain through wandering into curiosity of the world around.

Nature as the Third Teacher: Mud Kitchens, Tinker Tables, and More!**Megan Gessler, Blair Rodgers, & Lisa Gaynor**, The Morton Arboretum.

From mud painting to cloud watching, incorporating simple, yet unforgettable, experiences with the natural world is easier than you think. Come play as we explore natural hands-on prompts that can be implemented at any preschool, with any budget, for every child.

Play, Prepare, & Share: Connecting Families with Nature Play**Alysia Marshall-Seslar**, Well Beings with Alysia, LLC.

Explore hands-on nature play activities and gain practical strategies to make nature play accessible for families in your program.

Pursuing the Action: Supporting Schema Learning with Loose Parts**Lisa Daly**, Transforming Early Learning.

Learn how to identify what is significant in children’s play and then how to support learning with intriguing loose parts. Be prepared to transform your thinking and teaching.

Starting Small: How to begin to bring experiences in and with nature for young children in ways that feel comfortable and culturally affirming for the adults and children**Sheila Williams Ridge**, Inspired Practices in Early Education

Whether you are anxious or excited about getting young children outside, there are ways to help you take comfortable steps to give children all the benefits of nature-based learning. This session will explore ways to support young children's learning in important ways, both big and small.

Lunch in Freeburg Hall

11:15 – 12:15 pm

Afternoon Breakout Session #4

12:30 – 2:00 pm

Death, Decay, and Decomposition: Finding Life and Renewal in Natural Life Cycles**Carla Gull**, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College.

Death, decay, and decomposition are normal parts of life cycles in the natural world, such as when leaves wither and drop, flower petals wilt, or we find a dead insect on a walk. What lessons are to be learned about, in, with, and for nature when we learn into death, decay, and decomposition in a natural context? Understanding death in a natural context can help build social and emotional skills and resilience as we get to know the natural rhythms of life in our settings.

Math and Math Games in Early Childhood**Michael Eldridge**, University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

Participants will learn more about math games that can be used to explicitly teach and reinforce new concepts to young children. In addition to learning the math games, participants will have a chance to play and explore materials.

Project Approach and Nature: Nurturing Social-Emotional Growth as we Learn and Play**Melissa Walter & Kendra Nenia**, Northern Illinois University.

Join this interactive workshop to discover the power of nature and the Project Approach. Discover how these practices can foster social-emotional growth and leave with a plan to implement them.

Earthly Wonders**Alex Pafilis-Silverstein & Jola Dohrmann**, Chicago Children's Museum.

The session aims to empower educators to foster a rich learning environment by crafting a nature-oriented classroom despite constraints like limited natural light, outdoor areas, and a modest budget. (Also offered during the Friday PM session.)

The Impact of Constructive Play on Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood**Crystal Foles**, Greenville University, School of Education.

Explore the vital connection between constructive play and social-emotional growth in early childhood, revealing its role in fostering empathy, problem-solving, and positive relationships for holistic development.

Shifting Forms of Land & Sky**Kristi Cameron**, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

Join this interactive workshop to discover the power of nature and the Project Approach. Discover how these practices can foster social-emotional growth and leave with a plan to implement them.

Ensuring physical, emotional, and psychological safety in your outdoor program. A practical approach to risk-benefit assessment

Angela Rekers, St. Ambrose University. Participants will engage in both site and activity risk-benefit assessment activities in order to develop competence and confidence leading outdoor sessions, whether on-site, e.g., school grounds, or off-site, e.g., local woodland/parks.

Closing Keynote: Margie Cooper

2:15 – 3:15 pm

Childhood's Possible Worlds

What are ways we can extend the learning, playing, relating, expressing, and imagining of young children? Who do we imagine children to be? What do we believe we can offer them? Our image of the child orients the choices we make. Our view of our role as adults can translate into opportunities children are afforded or denied.

Vendor Giveaways

3:15 pm

BREAKOUT SESSION SPEAKERS

Dr. **Rachel Larimore** is an educator, speaker, consultant, researcher, and author. Her work focuses on the intentional integration of nature to support young children's holistic development by learning with nature to expand their worlds and live rich, full lives. She has written multiple books including *Establishing a Nature-Based Preschool*, *Preschool Beyond Walls: Blending Early Childhood Education and Nature-Based Learning*, and *Evaluating Natureness: Measuring the Quality of Nature-Based Classrooms Pre-K Through 3rd Grade*. Rachel is founder and Chief Visionary of Samara Early Learning, an organization focused on helping early childhood educators start nature-based schools or add nature-based approaches into their existing program.

Lisa Daly is passionate about transforming early learning to deepen meaningful experiences and connections, innovation, creativity, and reflection. Her professional work is centered around collaborating with educators to shift teaching approaches and transform learning environments to support children's identities, inquiry, and engagement. Lisa is professor emerita of early childhood education at Folsom Lake College, a child and family advocate, author, consultant, and presenter. Lisa has over 40 years of service as a classroom educator and administrator in preschool, parent co-operative, and college lab settings. She has co-authored *Early Learning Theories Made Visible*, the award-winning, internationally published *Loose Parts* series, and authored *Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* and *Loose Parts in Action (2023 release)* in Red Leaf Press.

Dr. **Carla Gull** is an associate faculty and coordinator of the Master of Arts in Environmental Education at Goshen College. She has taught in preschool, elementary school, and college settings in a variety of countries and locations. She is host of the podcast, *Loose Parts Nature Play*, and international Facebook group, *Loose Parts Play*. She also conducts academic research around the topics of loose parts, STEM, tree climbing, outdoor classrooms, and risky play. She is coauthor of the book, *Loose Parts Learning in K-3 Classrooms*. Her upcoming book with Laura Wilhelm focuses on loose parts and connections for children inspired by the natural world.

Michael Eldridge, MSed, graduated from SIUC in 2013 with a graduate degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Michael has taught Pre-K, Kindergarten and First Grade at The University of Chicago Laboratory Schools for ten years. Michael is passionate about uplifting children's voices and progressive education. In addition to a love of teaching reading, writing and math, Michael spends time each week exploring nature and the city of Chicago using a placed based learning and adventuring lens/curriculum with his first-grade classroom. Michael believes in the importance of experiential learning and of documenting children's work. Michael also shares a love of project work with the children in his classroom. Past projects have included creating a band with musical instruments, studying trees and birds, creating a play with props, lines, and costumes, book making and binding, studying the chick and butterfly life cycles, and learning more about the continent of Antarctica and penguins

Christie Angleton, PhD and **Xiaoying Zhao**, PhD are early childhood teacher educators at Illinois State University with a combined experience of more than 20 years working with young learners. An SIUC alum, Christie has employed the Reggio philosophy in her many years of teaching and teacher education. Collaboratively, Christie and Xiaoying work with teacher candidates to develop teaching orientations rooted in play, inquiry, diverse children's literature, and critical and social justice pedagogies.

Kristi Cameron is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She is a graduate of Georgia State University, where she received her PhD in Educational Policy Studies (Social Foundations). The Reggio Emilia educational project has been a strong influence on her educational philosophy and her practice as an early childhood educator. In 2011, Kristi co-founded The Nest Nursery School (a non-profit preschool in Atlanta, Georgia), and she continues to serve as the president of The Nest's advisory board.

Gabrielle DeLoach, M.S. has held various positions in a teaching, coaching, and mentoring role. She worked as a case manager at a community based mental health center (Manhattan, KS), led a youth program for middle and high school aged youth, developed curriculum in a lead role as a Graduate Teacher Assistant in the early childhood lab classroom (KSU), and a Lead Instructor at Hoeflin Stone House in the Early Childhood Education Department. She is currently the Director of Professional Development at Kodo Kids. Outside of work, Gabrielle enjoys hiking, gardening, and spending time with her family. She is passionate about the community of Manhattan and enjoys volunteering her time and resources to local organizations.

Jola Dohrmann is the Lead Early Childhood Educator at the Chicago Children's Museum. She is also a doctoral candidate in Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her primary research interests are young children's social and emotional development, with a particular emphasis on friendship. She attained an M.S. in Early Childhood Education from the Erikson Institute and holds a teaching license under category 04

Dr. Crystal Effler Foles is a seasoned educational leader with 15 years of experience in both public and private sectors. With a doctorate in special education, a specialist degree in curriculum and instruction, and masters degrees in secondary education and gifted education, Crystal is a highly qualified Director of Education and professor of Special Ed. Her passion lies in fostering constructive play within learning environments, recognizing its profound impact on student development. Specializing in curriculum selection and design, Crystal creates innovative educational experiences that ignite creativity and critical thinking. Throughout her career, Crystal has supported faculty, students, and parents through informed decision-making processes, ensuring alignment with learning goals. Known for her attention to detail and sound judgment, she prioritizes continuous improvement, guiding operations and teams with clarity and practicality. Crystal's approach integrates elements of constructive play, unlocking boundless opportunities for growth and creativity in education.

Steve Gariepy is an Experiential Education Specialist at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Stem Education Research Center. Focused on applying over 17 years of non-formal, experiential, environmental, outdoor, interpretation, adventure, team building, challenge, stewardship, volunteering, arts and ethics education/coordination and experience to develop, implement, and enrich a diverse array of programs on and off the SIUC campus through SERC and other on campus units. Steve is also a board member and educational consultant for the R. Buckminster Fuller Dome Home Interpretive Center in Carbondale Illinois.

Lisa Gaynor is a program instructor for the Little Trees Nature Based Learning Program at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, IL. With over ten years of experience in education, Lisa has found her passion in connecting young children to the world around with hopes of sprouting them into nature stewards. In her tenure at the Arboretum, Lisa also fills the role of Education Program Guide and Summer Camp Instruction. Lisa holds a bachelor's degree from Michigan State University and a master's degree from Northwestern.

Megan Gessler is the Little Trees Program Supervisor for The Morton Arboretum with over a decade of experience teaching and directing a nature-based preschool. Megan founded the Northern Illinois Nature Preschool Association, and serves on the Executive Leadership Team of the North American Association of Environmental Education's Natural Start Alliance. Megan holds an M.Ed. and a Certificate in Nature-based Early Childhood Education from Antioch University New England, and is a certified Master Naturalist. She is co-author of the Environmental Kinship Guide and contributing author of *The Sky Above and the Mud Below* and *Nature-Based Early Childhood Program Assessment and Guidebook*. **Blair Rodgers** and **Lisa Gaynor**, also from The Morton Arboretum, will be joining Megan in presenting their session.

Nancy Gulley has two bachelor's degrees, one in Sociology and the other in Early Childhood Education. She has recently completed her master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, all from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She has taught Pre-Kindergarten for 16 years. She participates in numerous boards and organizations that promote the education and awareness of early childhood education.

Alysia Marshall-Seslar is a developmental therapist with over a decade of experience in education, including in Early Head Start centers, as well as curriculum development. Along with a B.S. in early childhood education from Ball State University, Alysia is certified in the Parenting Journey curriculum and trained in classroom and home-based early education curricula. Her website, *Well Beings with Alysia*, is committed to making information about play and child development accessible to parents and early childhood professionals. As a nature lover, Alysia weaves strategies for nature play into therapy sessions with infants and toddlers, as well as in the learning resources on her website.

Kisa Marx is an Early Childhood Practitioner and Advocate with over two decades in the field. She is most passionate about her purposeful role in founding The Play Lab Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides humanity centering, self-affirming, high-quality care for every child. When Kisa is not fighting for the rights of children, you can find her with her partner tending to their garden of adult children, pets, and plants.

Rebecca Molitor considers herself fortunate to do what she is most passionate about...partnering with individuals and families. Her career started with family preservation programs before starting Compassionate Growth Counseling in 2000. With over 25 years of experience as a counselor in infant mental health, early intervention, attachment, trauma, and mindfulness, Rebecca frequently is a presenter and provides consultation services within Illinois, nationally and internationally. More recently, Rebecca became the first certified Prenatal Bonding (BA) Trainer in the United States. In quieter moments, Rebecca enjoys walks in the park with her dog, spending time with the children in her life, as well as deepening her meditation practice and writing haiku.

Kendra Nenia MEd. is passionate about high-quality early childhood experiences for all children. She is very excited to be a part of 4-C as a Higher Education Navigator! Kendra has spent the last 20 years working at NIU's Child Development and Family Center and has 30 years of experience in a wide variety of roles related to Early Childhood Education. She is happily married and has two smart & talented children. In her spare time, Kendra is an artist and a creator – She loves making pretty things!

Alexandra Pafilis-Silverstein is the Director of Early Childhood Learning and Strategy Lead of DEAI Initiatives at the Chicago Children's Museum. She is an educator, content developer, consultant, and advocate for play equity. Her work focuses on supporting healthy identity development for BIPOC and ALAANA children and families. With over 27 years of experience, she leads the development, implementation, and evaluation of experiences for young children and their caregivers. She bases her approach on culturally responsive and sustainable pedagogy, influenced by the principles and practices of the Reggio Emilia Inspired Approach to Early Childhood Education. Pafilis also oversees the museum's efforts to promote equity, eliminate opportunity gaps, and address institutional bias. Together with her team, she works to enhance the museum's DEAI efforts in all aspects of its operations. Pafilis, a bilingual educator of Puerto Rican and Greek heritage, excels at building relationships and fostering partnerships and collaborations locally and nationwide.

Angela Rekers has worked in education for 30 years. She started her career teaching high school English and English as an Additional Language, but was soon drawn to environmental education and Forest School pedagogy for all ages and abilities. She worked for a non-profit Forest School charities for 20 years, delivering outdoor learning and play sessions as well as teacher training in outdoor/play pedagogy. Angela has a Masters of Science in Environmental Education for Sustainability, and her PhD was rooted in developmental and ecological psychology, studying young children's participation in the classroom and at Forest School. She currently is an Assistant Professor at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, IA teaching on the Early Childhood Education with Special Education Endorsement teacher preparation program. Angela has published chapters for academic books on play, inclusion, and outdoor learning.

Tracy Stephens has been in the education field for 20+ years now. Throughout those years she's had the opportunity to teach and learn in a wide variety of settings. From public schools to the private sector, as well as childcare facilities, and tutoring, but her absolute favorite has been homeschooling.

Tracy's years of being an early childhood educator, along with her homeschooling experiences and love for nature, have led her to Creekside Nature School. Tracy's education and certifications include a B.S. Education with Early Childhood and Elementary Education certification, Forest Kindergarten Certification from Cedarsong Nature School, and Journeys Into Nature with Claire Warden through MindStretchers Academy

Jenn Thrasher has a degree in Early Care and Education and works as a Reggio teacher in Columbia, MO. Her passion for both loose parts and the great outdoors guided her towards the forest school pedagogy. In addition to being an early childhood teacher, Jenn is also the founder of Wild Tykes (a nonprofit created to encourage teachers and families to explore local wild spaces).

Dr. Melissa Clucas Walter, an assistant professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL, dedicates her research to empowering caregivers—both families and early childhood education (ECE) professionals—towards fostering nurturing and high-quality interactions in early learning environments. Dr. Walter's work encompasses strategies for improving parent-child interactions, developing innovative approaches in ECE curriculum design, and examining the impact of technology on early childhood experiences. She has also been integrally involved in pioneering methodologies for enhancing the ECE workforce, creating novel pathways for educators' professional development. Dr. Walter holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in Human Development and Family Studies, as well as a B.S. in Early Childhood Education Unified, all earned from Iowa State University.

Angela Wildermuth is the Director, Founder and Lead Teacher at Wilderkids Urban Forest School, offering classes and camps in parks in St. Louis, now in its 7th year. She has been immersed in the Children in Nature movement in St. Louis for nearly a decade since the birth of her second son. Before starting Wilderkids, she taught in Montessori and Home School settings and was a Stay-At-Home mom. She studied Psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia and went to graduate school for Theological Studies in Washington DC. She has co-authored a book of family adventure maps in St. Louis parks, leads family-friendly foraging workshops, and in 2019 joined the board of PLAYMO, a local non-profit with the mission of building a culture of outdoor play.