

nvironment

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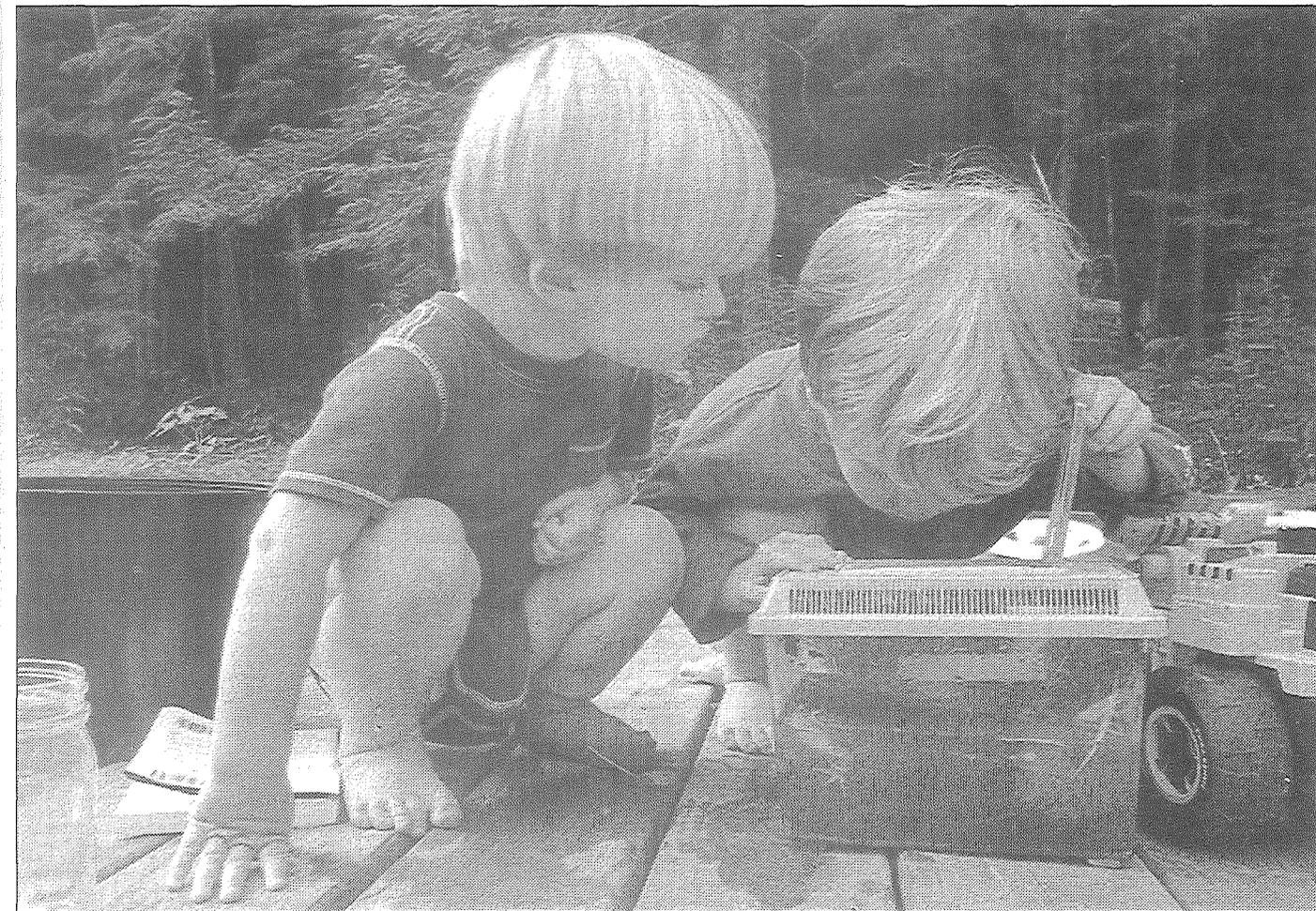


PHOTO BY RACHEL VALCOUR

Above and below: Children enjoy learning about the world around them. The Four Winds Nature Institute teaches volunteers to encourage children's sense of wonder as part of a community-based natural science program offered at more than 100 schools in Vermont.

Naturally curious

Students, families, teachers explore the outside world together

By ELIZABETH GIBSON

Children are natural scientists. Think about the endless questions they ask: Where do frogs spend the winter? What makes the wind blow? Why do crickets sing?

Young people learn about the world by exploring nearby nature and sharing their discoveries and ideas with a caring adult. Yet even in a place of such natural beauty as Vermont, it's easy to let the demands of everyday life and busy school schedules interfere with time outside.

Fortunately some 1,300 volunteers are working across the state to help children spend time outside exploring the natural world. As schools gear up for another year of learning, the Chittenden-based nonprofit group Four Winds Nature Institute is preparing teaching materials and lesson plans that encourage children's sense of wonder and place.

Four Winds educators teach community-based natural science to volunteers associated with more than 100 schools in Vermont and beyond. Most of the volunteers are parents of elementary school-age children; some are grandparents, and others are dedicated community members interested in nature and spending time with young students.

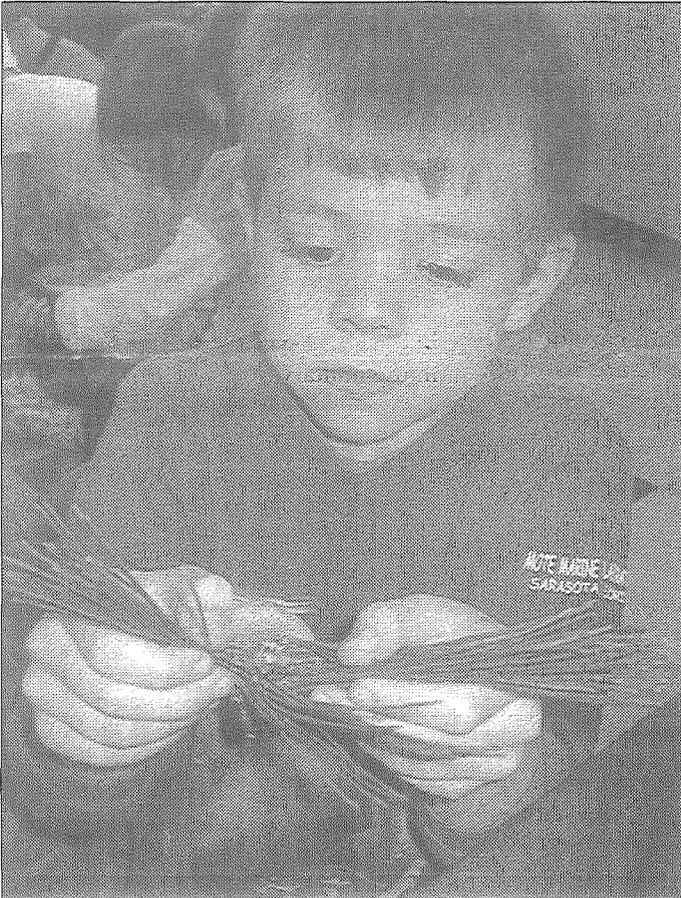
The only requirements to be a volunteer are a desire to learn and teach children and a commitment to spend about five hours each month preparing for and presenting each month's lesson.

The model is simple — the volunteers attend a workshop at the local school each month, led by a Four Winds naturalist-educator. The trainings are fun and informative, with volunteers engaged in hands-on learning activities to explore nature in every season.

In turn, the volunteers later share what they have learned with the students, both in the classroom and outside. Whether searching for galls in a field, identifying animal tracks and sign, drawing winter twigs or dissecting spring flowers, each unit introduces children to natural science in the school yard or neighborhood.

As the academic year begins, many schools are looking for Nature Program volunteers for their classrooms.

Four Winds director Lisa Purcell explains, "Everyone is busy, but this is such a wonderful way to be involved in the local school. My own children are grown and on their own, but I continue to volunteer. It's nice to have a connection to the school. It's so much the heart of this community. Anyway, what could be better than spending an af-



ternoon with kindergarteners catching insects in a stream?"

In the past decade our understanding of how students learn science effectively has advanced significantly. This spring the Vermont State Board of Education adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, or NGSS, which focus on essential science practices and large, cross-cutting concepts. The NGSS are aligned with the Common Core State Standards to ensure students are able to read for understanding, communicate effectively and use data to support scientific inquiry.

"Place-based environmental education gets kids looking at local questions," says Purcell. "Where do deer overwinter in our town? What insects are pollinating flowers in the school's garden? Is the sap running yet? When the subject is right out the back door, studying science has relevance for kids. A student's research paper, then, is answering a question the child has asked and wants to answer."

In a recent online survey, Four Winds asked participants why they volunteer. The anonymous responses reflect the program's place in the school communities.

One person said, "I think it is incredibly important to teach kids to really notice and pay attention to our world. Too many of us stop doing that as we get older or never even learn to do it at all, and I always hope that by teaching kids how to do it early, that attention to our natural world will last longer."

Another volunteer commented, "Four Winds is a fantastic way to get families

involved at school. This creates a better school experience for all concerned — school staff and faculty, families, children, etc."

And one parent said, "It's a blast! It's a way to stay connected to the school and community. It's a great way to share with my child and his peers."

"I really look forward to seeing our volunteers each month," says Four Winds naturalist Susan Sawyer of Woodbury. "They're interesting people, from all walks of life and with such different experiences. And they ask such good questions. I learn so much from them."

In Rutland County, Four Winds Nature Program schools include: Neshobe School in Brandon, Lothrop School in Pittsford, Barstow Memorial School in Chittenden, Shrewsbury Mountain School, Mount Holly Elementary School, Clarendon Elementary School, Wallingford

■ ON THE NET

Four Winds Nature Institute
www.fourwindsinstitute.org/

■ VOLUNTEERING

Are you interested in learning about nature and spending time outdoors with children? Consider volunteering with a Four Winds nature program offered at a school in your community.

The only requirements are a desire to learn and teach children and a commitment of about five hours each month preparing for and presenting the monthly lesson. As the school year starts, volunteers are still needed in many of the more than 100 schools across the state where the program is offered.

Call Four Winds for more information at 353-9440 or send an e-mail to info@fourwindsinstitute.org.

Elementary School, Rutland Town School, and Mettawee Community School.

Participating schools in Washington County include: Calais Elementary School, Rumney Memorial School, Doty Memorial School, Woodbury Elementary School, Fayston Elementary School, Warren Elementary School, Union Elementary School in Montpelier, East Montpelier Elementary School, and Twinfield Union School in Plainfield.

Four Winds Nature Institute, based in Chittenden, is a nonprofit organization advancing the understanding, appreciation and protection of the environment through community-based natural science education and research. In addition to The Nature Program, Four Winds offers professional development for early childhood professionals and K-12 teachers around the state. For more information contact Lisa Purcell at 353-9440 or info@fourwindsinstitute.org.

