



Educare Central Maine

In Bloom in Maine

Promising Practices in Nature-based Early Childhood Education

**Saturday, June 7, 2025
at Educare Central Maine
Waterville, ME**

Introduction

Join us in Waterville for the **In Bloom in Maine** conference for nature-based early childhood educators. We have another great line-up of keynote speakers and workshops that you won't want to miss. The workshops will take place in the play yards and outdoor areas of Educare, as well as in the nearby forest and stream areas. The location of the keynotes will be the Children's Discovery Museum just five minutes away. At lunch, one could meet with Maine chapter members of Antioch's *Inside-Outside* network and with the network's coordinator, Liza Lowe. Also during lunch, representatives of the *Maine Early Childhood Outdoors* network, and the Child Care Licensing Supervisors of the *Maine Department of Health and Human Services* will be available to share the collaborative work that is happening on licensing rules for outdoor, nature-based early childhood programs across the state.

Co-Sponsors:



Land Acknowledgement

*We acknowledge that the **In Bloom in Maine 2025** conference will be on the traditional, territorial lands of the Wabanaki (Ckuwaponahkiyik), People of the Dawnland.*

Educare Central Maine and George J. Mitchell School occupy the traditional homelands of the Tacconet band of the Kennebis/Canibas tribe of the Abenaki people. As products of colonization, and many of us descendants of white settlers, we are visitors to these stolen lands and waters and must acknowledge the violence and atrocities committed here.

At this gathering, we are grateful for the time to honor and cherish Indigenous lifeways and our shared connection to and care for the lands and waters. As stewards, we are all protectors of the animals and plants—the rocks, soils, birds, trees, mushrooms, and insects.

Revised Schedule for the Day

8:15 am–8:55 am	Registration–Select Workshops Morning Refreshments at Educare
8:55 am–9:05 am	Opening Circle at Educare
9:05 – 9:15 am	Walk to Children's Discovery Museum
9:15 am–10:15 am	Morning Keynote at Museum
10:15 am – 10:30 am	Break & walk to Educare
10:30 am–Noon	Morning Workshops at Educare
Noon– 12:50 pm	Lunch, MeECO/DHHS and Inside-Outside Chapters meetups
1:00 pm–2:15 pm	Afternoon Workshops at Educare
2:15 pm – 2:30 pm	Break & walk to Museum
2:35 pm–3:45 pm	Afternoon Keynote at Museum
3:45 pm–4:00 pm	Closing Circle at Museum
4:00 pm–5:00 pm	Educare Center Tours at Educare

Morning Keynote

Growing Connections: Cultivating a Love for Nature Through Early Childhood Education

Kim Shaw, Founder and Director of A Safe Place Childcare, Raleigh-Durham, NC

How can we nurture a lifelong connection to nature in the youngest learners? In this keynote, we will explore the profound role early childhood educators play in fostering children's sense of wonder, resilience, and care for the environment (the neighborhood). Drawing inspiration from *A Safe Place*, an urban garden serving underserved children in a food desert through free programming, we'll highlight how nature-based learning transforms communities and empowers children. Through stories, strategies, and reflections from years of practice, we'll examine how place-based learning experiences—rooted in gardening, outdoor exploration, and community building—empower children, families and staff to grow into stewards of the Earth. Together, we'll celebrate the joy and transformative power of connecting children to the natural world.

Kimberly Shaw is the Founder and President of A Safe Place Child Enrichment Center and Elizabeth's Garden. Starting as a family child care home in August 1997, it has grown to two five-star, NAEYC-accredited centers sitting on 3.5 acres in East and Southeast Raleigh, North Carolina. Kim has served thousands of families by exploring nature-based curriculum through natural connection, while providing a safe natural space for learning, playing, and celebrating community. Ms. Shaw continues to partner with local organizations including the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University to develop the outdoors as demonstration sites in both centers.



Morning Workshops *(continued)*

It Can Be Done: PreK for ME Curriculum...Outdoors!

Megan Vaillancourt, Preschool Teacher & Outdoor Learning Coordinator, Educare Central Maine, Waterville, ME
Amanda Jandreau and Stacy Higgins, Preschool Teachers, Educare Central Maine, Waterville, ME

Do you have a curriculum that's keeping you inside, when you'd love to be outside? Let's talk about the benefits of preparing curriculum, but with a twist. In this workshop, we will share pieces of the PreK for ME Curriculum and how it can be taught in an outdoor setting. Join us in hands-on exploration and discussion about how to transition prescribed curriculum from indoors to outdoors. The session will be creative, active, inquiry-based, and fun—just the way it can be for the children in our care!

Cultivating Wonder: Outdoor Explorations with Students in an Urban Setting

Leigha Hart, Environmental Literacy Teacher, Portland Public Schools, Portland, ME

In this immersive workshop, participants will discover the transformative power of outdoor learning through hands-on experiences. Led by educator Leigha Hart, the session will guide participants through a series of dynamic outdoor education activities designed to foster connections with themselves, with nature, and with fellow educators.

The goal of this workshop is to equip teachers with practical tools and strategies to integrate the outdoors into their classrooms more frequently. Participants will explore how to link outdoor experiences with existing curricula, while also brainstorming innovative lesson ideas that incorporate the natural world. By engaging with the unique flora and fauna of Maine, teachers will not only deepen their understanding of the environment but will also embrace the opportunity to inspire a sense of wonder and appreciation for nature in their students.

Printmaking in Nature: Exploring Creativity with Gelatin Plates

Charlene Lutz, Artist, Educator, and Author, Mount Chase, ME

How does artistic exploration connect children to nature? Through a series of hands-on activities based in artistic connection with the natural world, participants will experiment with creating prints using natural objects, layering colors, and experimenting with textures. We will ask questions together such as: What might children discover through printmaking as a mode of artistic exploration? How do natural patterns inspire art? What new details do we notice about objects when using them in printmaking? How can this activity enhance sensory awareness in children? How might printmaking encourage creative storytelling? Throughout active creative exploration, participants will engage in discussion about patterns, textures, and observation and link these to the developmental benefits for young learners. Educators will leave with the skills to offer this integrated activity to the children in their care.

Morning Workshops

Bringing Nature In: Supporting Sensory Needs in the Indoor Classroom

Meg Kenter, First grade teacher, Berwick Academy, Berwick ME
Sue Ford, Occupational Therapist, Owner of Coorie Wellness LLC, Kittery, ME

In this hands-on workshop, participants will learn creative and practical ways to support students' sensory needs by bringing nature into the indoor classroom. Meg and Sue will guide attendees through strategies for incorporating natural elements—such as plants, natural textures, and animal movement activities—into everyday learning environments to enhance focus, emotional regulation, and sensory processing. Through simple, effective techniques, educators will discover how to create a calming, stimulating space that helps students thrive and better manage sensory challenges.

Morning Workshops *(continued)*

Building a Restorative Nature-based Practice for Educators

Anne Adams, Network Coordinator, Maine Early Childhood Outdoors and K-2 Teachers, Camden Rockport Elementary School, Camden, ME

This reflective and restorative workshop explores the powerful connection between educators and the natural world, and how that relationship shapes one's outdoor teaching. Drawing on the stories in *Educating Children Outdoors* by Amy Butler, participants will examine how experiences with nature influence an educator's ability to inspire children's connections to the outdoors. The session is designed to help participants to reinvigorate connections to nature for personal renewal and modelling for students, embrace unique identities as nature-based educators, and gain confidence to share that connection with colleagues and children. The session will take place in a peaceful outdoor setting with time for engaging activities, personal reflection, sharing stories, and building supportive teaching relationships.

Developing Routines in an Outdoor Classroom

Heather Bowen, Pre-Kindergarten teacher, Camden-Rockport Elementary School, Rockport, ME

Join us as we introduce nature-based routines for outdoor classrooms that help establish a safe and joyful outdoor learning experience. We all know that our children thrive in routine – but how do we take that knowledge outdoors? Routines will be modeled that foster a sense of community, wonder, and safety beyond the fence and everyone will leave with their own practice. Participants will gain ideas for games, activities, and songs that contribute to the routines. Let's get messy!

Lunch We enjoy treating you to a tasty and healthy lunch. Participant could meet with Maine chapters of Antioch's Inside-Outside network or with the Maine Early Childhood Outdoors network, or the Maine Department of Health and Human Services Child Care Licensing Supervisors.

Afternoon Keynote

A Perfect Pairing: Nature Play and Sensory Integration

Sue Ford, Occupational Therapist and Owner of Coorie Wellness LLC, Kittery, ME

In this keynote, Sue will explore the powerful connection between emotional regulation, nature-based education, and resilience. Using her lens as a pediatric occupational therapist, she will discuss how outdoor environments and meaningful play can support emotional regulation, enhance sensory processing, and foster adaptability and growth in children. Sue will share strategies to strengthen the mind-body connection and provide tools to help educators support children in building strong foundations for development, resilience, and connection within the natural world around them.

Sue Ford is a Pediatric Occupational Therapist, Infant Massage Educator, Reiki Master, and founder of Coorie Wellness in Kittery, Maine. With over 20 years of experience, she is dedicated to supporting health, wellness, and emotional resilience in children and families. Her work spans private practice, early intervention, schools, community education and parent/family consulting. Passionate about nature-based learning, Sue integrates natural spaces and creative movement into programs, believing these practices build emotional regulation and resilience, and creates tools to foster connection and mind-body awareness. Outside of work, she enjoys exploring New England's seacoast and mountains with her husband, three children, and two dogs.



Afternoon Workshops

Sparkling Emergent Learning through Nature and Play

Jessica Lewis, Founder and Teacher, Inch by Inch Preschool, Wilton, ME

Let's slow down and notice the world around us. When children (and adults) have ample time to explore and play in natural environments, the curriculum will usually present itself. When adults learn to notice, reflect and wonder alongside children, they are able to follow the children's lead, support emergent learning, encourage inquiry, and acknowledge the importance of play. This session will provide an opportunity for you to see the world through the eyes of the children and recognize moments that can flow into deep learning. Through outdoor exploration, you will observe and document nature's rhythms, encouraging spontaneous learning and discovery. You will leave the session with a renewed awareness of the natural world and with practical tools and strategies on how to incorporate emergent learning, seasonal happenings, and natural loose parts into your work with children.

Dewdrops

Watch the dewdrops in the morning,
Shake their little diamond heads,
Sparkling, flashing, ever moving,
From their silent little beds.
See the grass! Each blade is brightened,
Roots are strengthened by their stay;
Like the dewdrops, let us scatter
Gems of love along the way.

by Myra Viola Wilds

Afternoon Workshops *(continued)*

Increasing Accessibility: Mini Explorations in Nearby Nature

Annie Coaluca, Executive Director of Early Learning & Family Services, Bath Area Family YMCA, Bath, ME

If we can agree that access to the rest of nature is fundamental to our humanity, to our very being, it could open the way to a renewed ecological solidarity—an intertwining of human rights and the rights of all nature. ~Richard Louv

The United Nations has determined that access to nature is a basic human right. We know about the vital importance of increasing accessibility to nature for children's well being and for equity in education. So, what can we do? One YMCA, play-based enrichment program – for children 18 months to 5 years old – practices mini explorations in nearby nature. With six classrooms, they also serve as the Bath public school district's preschool program. Participants will have the opportunity to experience “a day in the life” of the program, engage with activities, and learn outdoor routines. They will leave with practical takeaways and ideas for their own programs to increase accessibility: truly, nature for all.



University of Delaware Lab School

Nature Talks: Empowering Language Development Through Outdoor Adventures

Kate Glennon, Speech Language Pathologist, Certified Nature Educator & Founder of Outdoorsy SLP, Seacoast, NH



Educare Central Maine

Join Kate for a hands-on, immersive workshop designed to connect the wonders of nature with the power of communication. This multi-sensory experience invites participants to explore how outdoor adventures and exploration can inspire and support language development. Through engaging activities and guided exploration, participants will use their senses to enhance their own communication and gain insight into the natural world as a catalyst for expressive language growth. Participants will leave with practical, nature-inspired activities to promote language development through play, making this workshop ideal for educators, therapists, parents, and anyone passionate about empowering communication through meaningful, hands-on experiences. Step into the woods, awaken your senses, and discover how nature talks!

The Power of Growing Food with and for Children

Kim Shaw, Founder and Director, A Safe Place Childcare
Abram Shaw, Early Childhood Teacher, A Safe Place Childcare, Raleigh-Durham, NC

In this hands-on, outdoor workshop, participants will explore how growing food can become a dynamic and engaging way to connect young children to the natural world. We will dig into strategies for creating child-centered gardening experiences that encourage curiosity, collaboration, and responsibility. From planting seeds to harvesting and preparing food, we'll highlight practical, age-appropriate activities that foster sensory exploration, science discovery, and a sense of community. Participants will leave with creative ideas for integrating gardening into early childhood and elementary curricula, even in small spaces. Come prepared to get your hands dirty and embrace the joy of growing food together.

Small Worlds from Little Hands: Using Small Worlds to Enhance Early Learning

David Sobel, Professor Emeritus and Author, Antioch University New England, Keene, NH

Susie Spikol, Author, *The Animal Adventurer's Guide*, Naturalist, Harris Center for Environmental Education, Hancock, NH

From fairy homes and mouse villages to Lego creations and ant amusement parks, explore how creating and playing in small worlds is an essential form of play in childhood. See how these microcosms inspire children's creativity and imagination, problem-solving skills, and social and emotional development. Discussion of the role of small worlds in child development will be followed by creating our own small beings and their own mini-world. This workshop is a recognition of how not all adventures and experiences need to be big. Some of the best are, in fact, tiny.

Squirrels and Seeds: Nature-based Curriculum Connected to State Science Standards

Darilyn Birse, 2nd Grade Teacher, Mitchell School, Kittery, ME

Scurry, clasp, flutter, float, and fly – seeds are on the move! Come join us to learn about designing, planning, and implementing NGSS aligned nature-based lessons that get students excited, curious, and intrigued by the natural world around us. In this workshop, we will be learning about seed dispersal through play-based movement, our careful observation skills, and thoughtful group readings and reflections. Be ready to think deeply about bringing the state standards alive while teaching outdoors and come ready to be a little silly. Participants will leave with ideas (and maybe beginnings of plans!) for integrating nature and outdoor learning with science standards.

Registration Fees

Individual Working Professional	\$125
Group Rate	\$100
(per person; 3 or more from the same school)	
AU students or alumni	\$75

Workshops will be selected at Registration Check-In on the morning of the conference.

REGISTER HERE

www.antioch.edu/annual-events/in-bloom-conferences