



Gaining Comfort, Camaraderie and Confidence: Students with Autism Explore Nature Through Senses

A mix of excitement and nervousness fills the students each time The Nature Connection comes to visit Nashoba Learning Group (NLG).

Recently, staff and volunteers of The Nature Connection introduced a group of young students to three therapy animals, two guinea pigs named Fluffy and Popcorn, and one hedgehog named Honey. The students interacted with the animals with curiosity and caution. Many held the animals and laughed when they found out that Popcorn, one of the guinea pigs, needed haircuts just like they do!

Every other week, The Nature Connection provides educational and therapeutic nature programs for students with autism ages 8 to 15 years old at the NLG, a school for students on the autistic spectrum in Bedford, MA.

"This is an engaging experience for them to share with their peers. They get to connect with nature which makes it wonderful and unique."

Liz Martineau
President and Clinical Director,
Nashoba Learning Group
Bedford, MA

Liz Martineau, President and Clinical Director of NLG, recently spoke of The Nature Connection's impact on NLG's students.

"It's been so exciting to see this one young man, once so terrified of this animal, having progressed so far that he can touch an animal without an instant fear reaction," she said.

Individuals who fall on the autistic spectrum can be easily frightened and overstimulated, making nature and the vast outdoors an uncomfortable environment for some, Martineau explains. Many of the students at NLG learn better through touch. Pinecones, live moss, budding plants and colorful flowers are just a few of the many materials that The Nature Connection carries into the classroom to share with students.

"[The activities are not] as overwhelming of an experience as it would be out in nature," said Martineau. "The sensory aspects of the natural materials are great. [They] make the connection that the animals live in this habitat, and this is how they get food. These creatures live lives different than we do."

The Nature Connection staff and



A student from the Nashoba Learning Group holds up a fungi with The Nature Connection's program coordinator, Samantha Sheppard.

volunteers tailor activities with the understanding that the students all have different comfort levels.

"The thing that is wonderful about The Nature Connection is that the [program coordinator] has a lesson plan, but she's good at gauging how the students are doing developmentally," Martineau said. "If a student is uncomfortable touching the animal, they don't have to."

Students continue to discuss nature and the activities even after staff and volunteers of The Nature Connection have packed up and left NLG for the day.

During program visits, students have new and varied opportunities to interact with nature and are left feeling enthusiastic about their new connections with nature, Martineau said.

"There aren't that many novel things in their day that they can get excited about," she said. "Hearing the kids talk about it afterwards is wonderful."

Elders Enjoy 'Front Row Seat' to Nature:

The Nature Connection Comes to Carriage House Residents

The Nature Connection has partnered with The Carriage House at Lee's Farm, an assisted living facility, located in Wayland, MA. Through this new program, The Nature Connection will be able to touch the hearts of so many of The Carriage House elderly residents.



Tim Smith, a Nature Connection volunteer, visits with his mother and Carriage House resident Jun Smith, at a Nature Connection program.

"Knowing mom and her community of friends will have a front row seat interacting with animals and nature's bounty choked me up. Bravo to the Carriage House and to the Nature Connection for making these experiences possible."

"Mom and her community of friends will have a front row seat interacting with animals and nature's bounty..."

-Tim Smith
Nature Connection Volunteer

Tim Smith is a longtime volunteer of The Nature Connection whose mother is currently residing at the facility. He said that he felt overjoyed when he heard about the programming opportunity.

"I am intimately familiar with the healing power of The Nature Connection programs," he said.

The Power of Nature: Caregiver Trainings



Nature can build a bridge to elders with memory loss. Free trainings open to elder-care professionals and family members caring for loved ones with dementia.

Wednesday, May 2
Youville Place at Lexington
Professional Caregiver Training

Wednesday, May 30
Lexington Community Center
Family Caregiver Training

Registration required.
For more information see
nature-connection.org/caregiver-trainings



A student from the Nashoba Learning Group in Bedford, MA explores a budding flower with curiosity.

The Nature Connection

is a non-profit organization that brings nature-based programs to people with limited access to the natural world. Founded in 1983, The Nature Connection brings individuals together with nature's capacity to teach and to heal.

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Note from Executive Director



As spring slowly arrives, I feel once again how nature nurtures us in our everyday lives. Feeling joy when we see April's first bulbs, happiness in caring for (and being cared for) by our pets, or peace felt while walking - even briefly - among trees. Each time a child relaxes as he looks into the eyes of the guinea pig he is petting, each time an elder delights as she runs her fingers through an herb bundle and smells rosemary and thyme: what a difference nature makes in people's lives.

Because of your generosity, our staff and volunteers are able to bring each season indoors, and right into the hands of our program participants. From the crunchy leaves of fall, to the bird nests of spring. With each visit, a child is empowered by her newly found ability to plant a seed and grow her own food; an elderly gentleman remembers exploring tidepools in his youth, with their seaweed and sea creatures, as he watches a hermit crab slowly emerge from its shell.

Within the past year, our programming has grown by 25%. As part of that growth, we are now reaching more young children, such as the children at Littleton Academy—a group home where kids go to school on campus—as well as Nashoba Learning Group, a school for children with autism. With each new site, we are on our way to meeting our goal to lead the effort to make animal and nature-assisted therapy widely practiced in Greater Boston.

As E.O. Wilson, an American biologist and author, once said, "Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive and even spiritual satisfaction." I truly believe this. Nature nurtures. Thank you for making this organization what it is today. With your support, we are able to bring nature to individuals who need it the most.

Sophie Wadsworth
Executive Director



Ellen Leigh, an advisory board member, gets kisses from her therapy dog, Ricky, at a recent Nature Connection event.

Learning about Bears in Winter, Sprouting Seedlings in Spring: Program Launch Brings Hands-on Nature to Wayside Youth

How would you help kids experience the warmth a bear feels during frigid New England temperatures? Staff and volunteers at The Nature Connection bring ice and crisco!

One February afternoon, at our newest youth site, six students placed their bare hands in a pail of ice water. They squealed at the bitter cold that touched their skin. Then, each child rubbed dense crisco on their hand and brought it back to the ice. It didn't feel cold to them anymore!

"I'm so excited to bring to our kids experiences they could never have otherwise."

Penny Russell
Program Director,
Wayside Youth
Framingham, MA

These students are residents at the Wayside Youth and Family Support Network's Framingham location. This is a residential treatment center for youth, ages 11-18 years old, who face challenges, including mental illness and behavioral and/or addiction issues.

Since students live on campus, many have pets waiting for them at home. The animals, plants, and other materials that

The Nature Connection brings in can give the students comfort and remind them of home.

Through this new partnership, The Nature Connection hopes to bring balance, socialization and inspiration to each student. Each program is designed to foster positive social dynamics both between students, as well as between students and staff. In turn, this can lead to positive community engagement.

When it came to the crisco and ice activity, the students were eager to share this experiment with the Wayside Youth staff, said Taylor Eagan, Program Manager for The Nature Connection.

"The kids explained the whole activity and led their staff members through it," she said. "The staff regularly sit with us and engage with nature right along side the kids: whether making their own tea blend, using moss to cover a birdhouse, or talking about chinchillas and how animals adapt to winter."

Currently, Wayside Youth students are working together with The Nature Connection to grow a community garden.

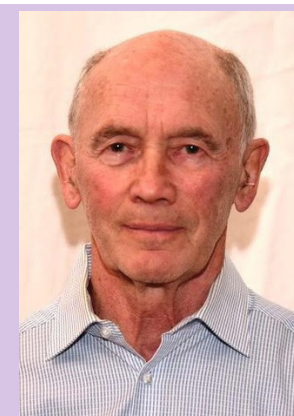


Program rabbits Milo and Dilly bring comfort and acceptance to resident students.

In March, they planted beans, tomato, and pepper seed. Now, they're watching them sprout!

Wayside Youth's program director, Penny Russell said: "I'm so excited to bring to our kids experiences they could never have otherwise."

Concord Resident and Volunteer Joins Board of Directors



The Nature Connection welcomes Dave Witherbee as new Board of Directors' treasurer.

Since Dave Witherbee saw his very first program with The Nature Connection, he has been impressed by how kids interact with one another.

"The kids aren't worried about being wrong," he said. "They are in the spirit of 'we're all learning it together,' the spirit of 'Let's try to figure this out together.'"

He recalls seeing kids in a Nature Connection ocean program at the Watertown Boys and Girls Club. As they patiently worked together to match one half of a shell with the other half, Witherbee observed how well the students shared and collaboratively communicated with one another.

Inspired by seeing programs "in the field," Witherbee joined The Nature Connection's board as Treasurer. He has lived in Concord since 1973 and brings over 45 years of experience in the financial services industry. Now retired, he actively volunteers with multiple organizations and explores nature behind his camera lens, on a bike, or in a kayak.

Witherbee believes that The Nature Connection provides its program participants with "a safe space to be themselves," he said.

"It [brings] some out of a place where they were stuck. It helps them feel alive."