

From the community:

## Getting Youth In the Outdoors: NaturePlay Documentary & Panel Discussion



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Growing bodies of research are praising the importance of nature in human growth and development-mentally, physically, socially, and academically. With this in mind, there are many individuals and organizations in the Chicago region working to get kids outside for both learning and play.

On Sunday, April 2 from 1-3pm, two such organizations-Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods and Heller Nature Center (Park District of Highland Park)-are bringing the Chicago region a free screening of award-winning documentary, NaturePlay. The film explores the importance of nature as classroom and play space, focusing on how Scandinavian countries incorporate nature into their education system and the outcomes these efforts produce.

Going further than just watching NaturePlay, Brushwood Center and Heller Nature Center are bringing area education experts in for a panel discussion following the film to serve as a community dialogue about how to get kids connecting to nature, why it is important, and what resources are available to make the connection happen. The panel, facilitated by Emilian Geczi, includes Naomi Hershiser, Liza Sullivan, and Jessica Reyes. Each of the panelists have dedicated their professional lives to making and deepening youth connections to nature and are experts in their field:

As Dean of Environmental Learning at Prairie Crossing Charter School in Grayslake, Naomi Hershiser works with students and educators to integrate environmental learning and enthusiasm for nature into the daily school experience. Before starting at PCCS in 2003, Naomi taught environmental education at nature centers and museums. She has earned a MAT from [Dominican University](#), an Environmental Education certification from University of Minnesota Duluth, and a BA from Carleton College.

Liza Sullivan is Executive Director of The Alliance for Early Childhood, an organization serving those who teach and care for young children. She is also co-founder of ThroughPlay, an early childhood educational resource supporting innovative play experiences and learning through nature. Liza began as an elementary teacher, moving on to become Manager and Director of Student and Educator Programs at the Chicago Children's Museum, developing programs for both students and teachers. Liza also served the museum as Assistant Vice President of Education, managing daily operations

as well as programs that yearly reached over a quarter million children and educators. Liza advocates for "free play" and "nature play," writing articles and blogs, and presenting at conferences on these topics.

Jessica Reyes is a 15-year veteran in the environmental education field. Her passion for education and the outdoors aided her in assisting with the design of the Park District of Highland Parks Heller Nature Center's Wander Woods Nature Play Space. She has also helped develop and launch the Monarchs and Minnow Early Childhood Program for the new Rosewood Beach Interpretive Center and revamped Heller's early childhood classes into Heller Forest School. As a Naturalist, she oversees and leads early childhood programs, grade school field trips, after-school, scout, and summer camp programs. She graduated from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida with a degree in Environmental Studies and a minor in Human Development.

The panel will be facilitated by Emilian Geczi, Brushwood Center board member and Director of the Natural Start Alliance, a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education. Emilian is dedicated to connecting youth to nature and has built his professional career on this dedication with prestigious organizations such as Chicago Wilderness and the Center for Humans and Nature.

The film and panel will bring a thoughtful discussion to the Chicago region community of how adults can facilitate more--and more meaningful--youth connections with nature. Brushwood Center and Heller Nature Center are excited to host the NaturePlay film screening and panel discussion on April 2 from 1-3pm at Heller Nature Center (2821 Ridge Rd, Highland Park, IL 60035). Free. Register at [BrushwoodCenter.org](http://BrushwoodCenter.org).

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