

# Time to Grow in Nature

Salamander Nature Awareness School, San Jose, California

by Meg Pelose

Salamander Nature Awareness School is a small forest preschool program taking three-to-five year olds on outdoor adventures daily, in a county park in Silicon Valley. They explore and observe nature with the teacher and grow socially with their peers, using all their senses to develop physically, emotionally and intellectually. Two year olds can join the class with their parent in the circle gatherings and on the nature hikes. Parents keep cellphones off, to focus on seeing their child experiencing the beauty of nature.

Born and raised in Hawaii, I enjoyed swimming in the warm ocean, seeing waterfalls in tropical forests and double rainbows. Banana, papaya, mango, and coconut trees grew in yards along with brightly colored flowers; birds and geckos were often seen and heard. So many of my senses were engaged with my surroundings, it was paradise. This experience of the natural world I wanted for my own children while living in Silicon Valley, so I sought out like-minded parent groups, a forest preschool, and early childhood educators.

I became part of the inaugural Tiny Treks class for two year olds and their parents to meet in different parks. When my son turned three, he joined Leaping Lizards Nature Awareness Preschool where the founding teacher took six children on hikes two mornings a week. Jack loved the adventures in nature and grew socially those two years. When my daughter Gina turned three, I accompanied her as a forest preschool aide. It was magical to see the children develop their curiosity, coordination, endurance, verbal and social skills in nature. When her two years were over, I was heart-broken to leave the class and realized how valuable time in nature was for me too!

Next, at Mulberry School, I participated in my children's classrooms with cooking, science, math, and spelling; I supervised on the playground and field trips though 5th grade. Being at a parent participation school was such a gift for my children because of the education that I received on child development from the wonderful teachers and other caring parents. Serving on the school board,



I organized parent education speakers, began the Kindergarten Readiness Night, and proposed that the school join the Common Ground Speaker Series. When my children moved on to middle school at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, I helped WSP join Common Ground. Its nationally known speakers highlighted how exercise improves our mood, health, and brain development, and the science behind the benefits of time in nature.

Starting in 2010, Rudolf Steiner's view of education became my focus with his whole child approach, learning from the natural world, and protecting childhood. While doing my Waldorf teacher training through Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, I became a substitute teacher at WSP. I also completed five years of Spatial Dynamics movement training, including how to teach archery, discus, javelin, and fencing. From 2015-16 I was the two-day assistant teacher at Leaping Lizards before the founder retired. Being back hiking with preschoolers reinforced how this fundamental need for children to be in nature has grown even more critical as technology has become so pervasive in our lives. With a masters in electrical engineering and having worked for Hewlett-Packard in the cellular industry, I believe children need to fully experience childhood with less technology in order to thrive. So I began working on creating my own



forest preschool and attended Antioch University's Nature Based Early Childhood Education training and Forest Kindergarten Teachers' conferences. I decided to focus on place-based education and having children experience the seasons at one park.

I started Salamander Nature Awareness School in 2017 as both my children are were off to college. It is a forest preschool which serves a diverse group of students whose parents come from many parts of the US and the world. I enjoy collaborating with these parents to nurture their children out in nature!

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Meg Pelose is a Forest Preschool Teacher and Nature Based Early Childhood Educator. Additional resources are at [www.salamanderschool.com](http://www.salamanderschool.com)