

# Forest school for kids also offers de-stressing for parents

By DAVID MACAULAY  
VIRGINIAN-PILOT CORRESPONDENT | SEP 23, 2020 AT 10:16 AM



Pictured is Mia McBride, one of the water samplers in the Elizabeth River Project's citizen water monitoring program in May. Staff from the Elizabeth River Project are encouraging parents to immerse themselves in the trees, a technique called "forest bathing," while their kids take part in the new Park Forest School in October. (Courtesy of the Elizabeth River Project) (HANDOUT)

Parents struggling with the challenges of virtual learning in the COVID-19 era are being encouraged to de-stress in Portsmouth's Paradise Creek Nature Park while their children learn.

Staff from the Elizabeth River Project are encouraging parents to immerse themselves in the trees, a technique called "forest bathing," while their kids take part in the new Park Forest School in October.

Robin Dunbar, deputy director of education for the Elizabeth River Project, said visits to the 40-acre park spiked this year as local people sought a safe place to get outdoors. Although the pandemic curtailed some educational and training programs, activities for kids are continuing this fall.



Pictured is Robin Dunbar, Deputy Director of Education with the Elizabeth River Project, dressed as Princess Elizabeth, the river's namesake. (David Macaulay/Freelance) (The Virginian-Pilot)

Four Forest School programs will be held in October. Dunbar said 60 students have already signed up for the courses that start Oct. 7. Each program features 15 students and their parents.

"It's based on the European tradition of kindergarten forest schools," Dunbar said. "I like that the model goes really well with the COVID challenges of social distancing and allows for exploration and discovery."

The Forest School program allows pre-K to second grade students to learn in the outdoors. The Elizabeth River Project, which runs educational programs at the city-owned park, decided to test out the idea with one class of 15 kids.

Dunbar was taken aback by the demand. "Immediately we had enough for four classes. I was like, 'OK we have to totally figure out our schedule now,'" she said.

Activities include making nature portraits, building stick sculptures, skipping, hopping and walking like animals, creating eco-art and planting native seeds for birds.

New staff member Christina Hall is certified in “forest bathing.” She will be putting her skills to use on the parents who visit Paradise Creek with their youngsters.

“You wander through the trees. The forest is real quiet, and you use all your senses to take in nature and the rest. Lots of studies show the healing qualities of nature, especially being among trees,” Dunbar said.

Dunbar said many parents are struggling with stress during the pandemic; some have lost jobs or are juggling the demands of babysitting and getting their students to learn online. She thinks they will benefit from the “meditative nature” of forest bathing.

“We thought it’s important that the parents have their own experience,” she said. “There are a lot of layers of stress on top of just trying to keep everybody healthy.”

The park has been a “de-stress magnet” throughout the pandemic, Dunbar said: “A lot of people were having cabin fever; some people needed to de-stress. They looked to nature for healing.”

The park experienced an increase in visitation when Virginia locked down due to COVID-19 precautions earlier this year.

“Before it was a mix. Now we are seeing more family units coming together. Also, the military has been using it. We are close to the shipyard,” Dunbar said.

The Elizabeth River Project met its educational goals for the year before the spring, but programs on the learning barge were curtailed, according to Dunbar.

However, the Youth Conservation Intern program at Paradise Creek in partnership with the Hampton Roads Workforce Council continued, albeit on a reduced scale.

“We had planned on 10 during the summer. We thought we would not find any during COVID,” Dunbar said. However, two I.C Norcom High School students were able to complete the internship.

“We were just thrilled. We will expand in the fall from a summer internship to a year-round internship,” she said.

The park's citizen water monitoring program also proved popular over the summer, attracting 35 students who collected samples from local rivers and waterways.

"They were all ages and from all over the watershed. The only stipulation we had is they needed to be close to the river," Dunbar said.

The program gave the education department a feel for the demand for outdoor activities. While Dunbar put many of the nonprofit's activities online and shot videos, she admits the transition to virtual learning was tiring.

"Although I personally was going through virtual exhaustion, I kept pushing through," she said.

She is committed to new ideas and approaches and plans to put the Elizabeth River Project's famous learning barge on wheels and take it through neighborhoods later this year. The barge is powered by sun and wind and described as "the world's first floating wetland classroom and America's Greenest Vessel," on the nonprofit's website.

For details on educational programs at Paradise Creek, see [paradisecreek.elizabethriver.org/school-programs](https://paradisecreek.elizabethriver.org/school-programs).

*David Macaulay, [maccazi17@hotmail.com](mailto:maccazi17@hotmail.com)*

---