

# Kids to learn about nature in outdoor preschool

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Kids climb trees, explore San Antonio Creek and catch bugs. In this forest, they see everything from birds to lizards, squirrels, foxes and coyotes.

Even fairies.

"They are everywhere," said Forest Preschool teacher Kelly Villarruel of the winged creatures. "They live in the woods out here ...

"You just never know which one of the insects is a fairy. They're shapeshifters. The children will show you. They know. They'll talk about fairies and build shelters for them. It's a way for children to connect with the natural world through their imagination."

Ms. Villarruel, 44, will encourage kids to be curious about nature at the Forest Preschool, a new four-day-a-week version of the nonprofit Wilderness Youth Project's one-day-a-week Chickadees and Bumblebees programs.

Nearly a dozen kids, ages 3 to 5, will meet 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays for 15 weeks from Aug. 30 through Dec. 16 in Tucker's Grove at Kiwanis Meadows, 805 San Antonio Creek Road, in Goleta. Children will sing songs, play games and hear stories in classes that Ms. Villarruel teaches with the help of a Wilderness Youth Project staff member and volunteer.

A 21-week program will run from January to June in the same park.

Ms. Villarruel said the Forest Preschool offers the same activities that were in Chickadee and Bumblebee classes but with the additional benefits of more time and less of a long break between sessions. She can build today on what kids just learned yesterday.

"We're doing things that address all the developmental areas for children — cognitive, gross motor and social/emotional," Ms. Villarruel told the News-Press on a recent day in the meadows at Tucker's Grove. "We spend a lot of time roaming the creek and getting to know the plants and animals that live in this area."

She talked about the wildlife that the kids have watched from a safe distance.



Kids commune with nature during a previous Chickadees program for ages 3-5 at Goleta Butterfly Grove on the Ellwood Mesa. Wilderness Youth Project has added a four-day-a-week Forest Preschool to its programs for the age group.  
ERIC ISAACS PHOTOS/WILDERNESS YOUTH PROJECT

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Teacher Maya Shoemaker leads participants during the Chickadees program at Goleta Butterfly Grove.

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Teacher Kelly Villarruel works on crafts during the Chickadees program at Rocky Nook Park in Santa Barbara.  
COURTESY WILDERNESS YOUTH PROJECT

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"We've seen bobcats, lots of different birds, foxes and coyotes and their tracks and scat," Ms. Villarruel said. "We spend a lot of time talking about who lives here and that this is their home, and we're guests."

Students hear Ms. Villarruel's stories about animals such as Brother Crow, who likes to dive-bomb her cat, Ninja Kitty, at her home in the mountains above Santa Barbara.

Ms. Villarruel also tells of the time her cairn terrier Otis tried to chase a buck, only to run in the other direction when the deer with its menacing antlers charged toward him.

The forest is a big playground for the kids, and Ms. Villarruel uses rope to create instant swings in the trees.

She also has the kids ride plastic sleds down a slope of dry oak leaves. "They get to work on their social skills," she said. "I'll bring two sleds for nine children so they're learning to share."

Kids also stack branches to make temporary forts.

And children learn about edible plants such as elderberries and other vegetation, Ms. Villarruel said. "If there's poison oak, they will get to see it in all its stages."

She teaches the kids about trees by greeting them: "Hello, Brother Sycamore. Hello, Oak Tree."

The school's games promote awareness of nature. In one, a kid is blindfolded and the other children must sneak past him or her as quietly as a fox. If the child hears them, he or she squirts them with a water bottle, which the children love on a hot day.

At Tucker's Grove, Santa Barbara resident Julia Fraas told the News-Press her daughter, Lily, 3, benefited from being in Chickadees and will be in the new four-day-a-week preschool.

"She used to be very clingy, stayed at my side and didn't want to go out and interact," Mrs. Fraas, 34, said. "Now she runs free. She says, 'Bye, Mom,' and takes off and explores."

Emily, 5, Mrs. Fraas' other child, also participated in Chickadees and loved it.

While her mother talked, an excited Emily walked up with a roly poly bug on her hand. "You want to hold it?" she asked a visitor. After the visitor declined, she smiled and went back to playing.

Mrs. Fraas and other parents love that their kids are playing in a forest, and getting fresh air and exercise in an age of computers, TV and smartphones. Instead of being glued to small screens, kids are looking up in the sky — see that bird? — and around them for the big picture.

"Everybody wants their kids to go out for recess and have that time outside," Mrs. Fraas said. "Why not have your entire school as recess?"

"I really wanted them to be connected to nature and be outside," she said. "They come home covered in dirt, from head to toe, and it's awesome! They're learning. They're being part of nature. They're making friends. It's a wonderful thing."

One boy enthusiastically introduced himself to the News-Press while swinging at the Tucker's Grove playground.

"I'm Miles!" the 6-year-old said. He added that he loved Chickadees and was able to see squirrels, lizards and birds while in the program. He even got to climb trees!

"I climbed one this morning!" he said. "There's a certain little pond where I like to play. It's way up on the trail! Way, like, far away!"

Miles is going into kindergarten, but his sister, Kirra, will be in this fall's Forest Preschool, their mother said.

"Kelly is amazing," she added. "She has an incredible ability to get down to each child's level and connect with them personally."

Ms. Villarruel brings her experience as a longtime preschool teacher and lifelong nature enthusiast to the Forest Preschool.

The Duluth, Minn., native grew up in Goleta, where she liked to play in rural Winchester Canyon. "My dad would say, 'Go out and play, and come back when it's dark.'"

After graduating in 1989 from Dos Pueblos High School, Ms. Villarruel earned an associate's degree in horticulture at Santa Barbara City College. She taught at preschools and day-care centers in Goleta and Lompoc.

Ms. Villarruel said she co-founded the Chickadee program, designed for the school year, and its summer counterpart, the Bumblebee program, in 2006.

She said parents have told her how much the time in the woods helps their kids.

"The parents tell me they see their children hiking three or four miles without ever complaining. After being in this setting, their confidence goes up."

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## **FYI**

Designed for ages 3-5, the Forest Preschool will take place Aug. 30 through Dec. 16 at Tucker's Grove at Kiwanis Meadows, 805 San Antonio Creek Road, Goleta. Cost for the 15-week program is \$3,000 for four days a week. Parents who pay by Aug. 1 will get a discounted rate of \$2,700.

Parents also can bring their kids three days a week for the reduced rate of \$2,250.

The second, 21-week semester, running January through June 2017, costs \$4,200 for four days a week and \$3,150 for three days a week.

The nonprofit Wilderness Youth Project, which puts on the program, offers payment plans for all applicants and scholarships for low-income families.

To enroll, go to <http://wyp.org/forest-preschool>. For more information, contact Wilderness Youth Project at 964-8096 or [registrar@wyp.org](mailto:registrar@wyp.org).

Wilderness Youth Project continues to offer its school-year Chickadees and summer Bumblebees programs for parents wanting to bring their kids just one day a week. For more information, go to <http://wyp.org>.