Learning to love outdoors

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Nature trail is ideal for curious kids

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PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST — Forget Wii and Nintendo DS.

The cold, slimy ooze of green frog eggs, the chance to leap across tree stumps and the hunt for slithering salamanders can evoke just as many children's giggles and screams as any video game.

The idea that the simple stuff of nature can provide mental stimulation and healthy exercise — especially for children with autism — is the hope of a new sensory-based exhibit, the Outdoor Adventure Zone, a partnership between the Asheville Autism Society and the Cradle of Forestry Interpretive Association.

"This is simple. It's not big; it's not flashy," said Adam DeWitte, director for education at the nonprofit CFIA. "The whole point is getting kids back to nature, climbing trees, looking for critters.

"It's been proven that when children with autism and other learning disabilities spend time outdoors, they are calmer. They feel like they have more of a mental connection to something when they're holding something like frog eggs instead of a plastic toy."

Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD, which refers to a group of developmental disabilities, including classic autism and Asperger's syndrome, affects one in 110 children born in the United States today, according to the Autism Society of North Carolina.

The Adventure Zone starts indoors with a picture-coded trail map. Visitors can choose trail stops such as the new movie, "There's Magic at the Cradle," about the importance of the human-nature connection through a child's eyes; a simulated ride on a helicopter over a forest fire; or an underground tunnel.

Then they head outdoors, where DeWitte recently led a preview tour for families who have children with autism. He took them to eight stations along a paved, wooded trail nearly a mile long.



Photos by John Fletcher/jfletcher@citizen-times.co

Adam DeWitte shows frog eggs to students during a tour of the new "Adventure Zone" at the Cradle o Forestry in the Pisgah National Forest.



DeWitte instructs Jacob Crosby at the Bug Eyes station. The station simulates a bug view of the world.

"The map with pictures sets up a good structure for them," said DeWitte, who designed the trail along with Sylvia Van Meerten, formerly of the Asheville Autism Society. "People with autism need to have structure."

At the "Magnifying Station," children used magnifying glasses to examine bugs; they squealed as they jumped over tree stumps on the Obstacle Course ("learning balance, problem-solving and fun"); and they got down and dirty at the Discovery Dig and Critter Search stations.

"I love nature, and it's very wonderful," said Lydia Lalemand, 10, of Waynesville, who has Asperger's syndrome. She toured the trail with her family, including brother, Frankie, 21, who has autism.

"I got to touch the frog eggs — yuck! I love it."

"We will definitely be back," said her mom, Mary Ann Lalemand. "This has been a very special day for us."

Joe Yurchak, regional directo of the N.C. Autism Society, sai there is no known cause for au tism, which affects more tha 50,000 people in North Carolina.

"Some folks are looking fo causes and cures, and some ar looking at working with individu als to increase their ability to liv their life to the fullest," he said "We know that early interventio plays a key role in assisting folk in the spectrum."

Yurchak said he can see the Ad venture Zone playing a role i helping with early intervention.

"I thought it was great to see th (CFIA) trying to be so inclusiv and reaching out to all children he said.

"And the kids looked like the were having a blast."

WANT TO VISIT?

- The Cradle of Forestry Historic Site, on U.S. 276 near Brevard, is now open daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Entry fee is $5 for ages 16 years and older; free for ages 15 and younger. Admission is free Tuesdays. Call 877-3130 or visit www.cradleofforestry.org.
- The Outdoor Adventure Zone, included in admission, is open to everyone.