



# ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

**Asher Wool, 8, uses a ferro rod and striker to light a bundle of tinder aflame at Earthwork school in western Massachusetts.**

*Photo: Ben James for NPR*

**4-Minutes** ([listen](#))

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**All Things Considered**

**Reporter: Ben James**

TRANSCRIPT:

A high school senior kneels in the forest duff, grasping a handmade bow. Eight-year-old Asher Wool explains what this teenager is up to:

"So, he's rubbing the string against the spindle to make a coal, that can make a fire."

No matches. No crumpled newspaper. It's friction fire. And this is [Earthwork](#), a wilderness school located in the woods of western Massachusetts. Frank Grindrod is the Director:

"We work with knives, we work with fire, we work with saws, we fell trees, we build shelters, we track animals,"

Asher spent three weeks at Earthwork camp this summer, with the kids all in masks and mostly keeping 6 feet apart. And even though he'll be in school this fall –

"We're probably doing Zoom school."

He'll also be out in these woods one full day a week, participating in a program that was previously only available to home-schooled kids.

Andrea Wool, Asher's mom, says with the demands of remote schooling, her son is going to need every minute in the woods he can get.

"It's just a lot of time on a screen, and Asher's a wiggly kid. He likes to move."

Numerous New England wilderness schools report they could double or triple their already increased programming and still have wait lists.



**(From left) Program leaders Jessie Lotrecchiano and Zachary Jones and Executive Director David Brownstein of Wild Earth, a wilderness school in New York's Hudson Valley.**

Photo: Ben James for NPR

Sam Stegeman is Executive Director of the [Vermont Wilderness School](#):

"I think we're entering the golden age of outdoor education. Because of COVID, one of the silver linings is we're finally getting huge numbers of American children outdoors during the school day."

But who gets to participate? David Brownstein is Executive Director of [Wild Earth](#), a wilderness school in New York's Hudson Valley. He says that for years he called his school accessible because of their generous financial aid program:

"But it really didn't meet the needs of people who are like, 'I don't have money for these kinds of things at all. They're not even on the menu of what's possible for my family.'"

Four years ago, Wild Earth began a collaboration serving 2,200 public middle schoolers in the urban district of Kingston, N.Y. The instructors took the kids on forest field trips, and they met the same kids on the school playground twice a week during recess. Mary Beth Bonville is assistant superintendent of Kingston schools:

We have students that have commented that they've never been in the woods before. They didn't know certain insects; they didn't understand how to build a fire."

Bonville says there are numerous academic benefits to Kingston's collaboration with Wild Earth:

"We've had teachers that actually have taken the programming from outside and brought it into their classroom."

But ultimately, Bonville says, the benefits come down to the social and emotional support kids receive from Wild Earth staff.

COVID has put that support on hold, at least for now. Kingston — like most urban districts across the country — is starting the year remotely. Field trips are canceled. Recess doesn't exist. Instead, David Brownstein hopes Wild Earth will find other ways to meet kids' needs for safe, structured outdoor play:

"We may end up in a parking lot running games after the school day. And then, as soon as they're done, we're like, 'Come on out, and let's run around together.'"

Back in western Massachusetts, Asher's mom Andrea Wool — who already worked at home before the pandemic — says she knows it's a privilege to be able to pull her son out of remote school for a weekly day in the woods at Earthwork:

"I have the flexibility and the schedule to be able to drive him out here," Wool says. "Not everybody can do that."

Asher himself is still working on fire building. Earthwork instructor Michael Haynack coaches him on how to make a spark and set his bundle of tinder aflame:

"There we go!!"

"Finally!" Asher shouts.

"Nice," says Haynack. "I'm sorry we dropped it pretty quick there."

"It's OK," Asher says. "At least I got the flame!"

A little fire, to help make it through the rest of the week at Zoom school.

For NPR News, I'm Ben James.