



NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017

Observation and Discovery

The reflections shared in this edition broadly reflect the Nature Action Collaborative for Children Universal Principle:

We believe it is important for educators to understand their role as researchers and facilitators who observe children's interactions with nature and support the emergent curriculum.



Photo by Joanne Eser

Have an Adventure!

The light from the sun's rays has produced energy for billions of years. Help children appreciate solar energy as a renewable source that can be converted into other forms of energy, such as heat and electricity. While these concepts may be too complicated for young children to grasp completely, simply fostering an appreciation for what we all gain from the sun's light will be a good first step in the right direction. The Sun's Wonderful Light, p. 52-53, www.connect.worldforumfoundation.org/environmental-action-kit/toolkits-2/



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

WorldForumFoundation.org/nature

Future issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your ideas, stories, and photos that relate to children's connections with nature to:

Tara Schroder: taras@natureexplore.org

Nature has Become Our Lifestyle

Sharon Ward, Dubai

Nurturing nature became a motivating influence in our philosophy following the 2014 World Forum in Puerto Rico. John Rosenow spoke about a “free-range and organic childhood” and his message connected with us like a bolt of lightning. Taking further inspiration from the workshops got us thinking ‘outside the box’ as to how we could support a connection with nature right here in the desert of Dubai! Fortunately, this process was aided by a like-minded team of teachers, and before we knew it our classrooms, outdoor environment, and teaching style and practices had completely transformed.

Our challenge lies with the hotter months with temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius, so having access to nature leading in and out of the summer months was a priority. We began by bringing nature into the classrooms. We found opportunities for this everywhere with stones, feathers, sticks, flowers, cinnamon bark, pinecones, shells, and even sand (which we have no shortage of). Very quickly we could see that learning with natural resources was powerful and before long we found little need for plastic toys, which we began to phase out. At this point, we are very driven by Reggio Emilia teaching practices and loose parts.

Our vegetable gardens have long been a part of our curriculum and each year the experience becomes greater. This year we have our first parent garden committee and the commitment from parents contributes to such a super feeling and sense of community. From a sustainable perspective, we compost all of our food waste from the nursery with Bokashi, which is a natural fermentation process. This means zero food waste, which then supports a healthy organic vegetable garden. The parents love to learn about gardening and compost and love to see their children learning about this wonderful cycle of life.

The eldest classroom recently began a project-based garden. The children and teachers found an area outdoors that was unused and decided to plant a beautiful garden. They planned, designed, dug out, and prepared and developed the space over several weeks. It was fantastic to listen to the children’s discussions, to see their ideas put in place and to hear the excitement and enthusiasm from all who watched this space grow. The children nurture this garden daily and have recently decided it is a garden for the fairies, and so have added small tables and chairs. What we love about this space is that it belongs to the children and, in developing this area, they have experienced every aspect of the curriculum.

Other ideas we have implemented:

- Outdoor mud kitchen and cooking station
- Observation and documentation walks around our neighbourhood
- Children are encouraged to climb trees
- Fruit and vegetable markets, which we hope to sell our own vegetables in soon
- A passion for teepees, which offer opportunities to incorporate nature
- Wooden recycled pallets are great for creating climbing equipment
- Bamboo ‘growing’ walls line the exterior of our nursery, inspired by Childspace in New Zealand
- An indoor sandpit under an indoor treehouse is one of our favourite places

Sharon Ward is originally from New Zealand, and has been living and teaching in Dubai for the last 11 years. She has a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and is studying towards her master’s, focusing on the early years. Wherever possible, Sharon believes in a natural, holistic, and ‘organic’ childhood, where a child’s self-confidence, strengths, and interests are supported.

Consider this:

- Heat was a challenge this program faced in Dubai, so they found opportunities to bring more nature indoors. What are your biggest challenges and how can you create opportunities from them?
- These teachers listened and supported children’s discussions when designing and building a garden project. What are your children talking about and how could you harness their curiosity as part of a class project?



Photos by Sharon Ward



Looking Closely

Joanne Esser, United States

A basic part of the science curriculum for my pre-kindergarten children at our pre-K through 12th grade independent school is for children to develop observation skills. Observation is the first and most essential element of what we call the "I Wonder Circle," the cycle of steps in the scientific method. Learning to observe carefully is the first step leading to other important science skills, such as asking good questions, hypothesizing, and designing experiments.

For young children, the best way to learn to observe is through immersion in a natural environment. I take my class hiking outdoors twice each week in all seasons. We explore two different small patches of woods: a grassy hill and a tiny pond that we are lucky to have within walking distance of our classroom. In those natural spaces, the children never seem to get tired of looking closely: at a bee hovering near a wildflower, at worms in the soil, at mushrooms growing on a rotting log, at animal tracks in the snow. Their focus and patience for studying what is in front of them in the natural world grows stronger over time as they practice this skill. They are self-motivated to discover what has changed in the environment since the last time we visited; they often exclaim with joy when they find something new.

Back indoors, I invite children to continue looking closely. Drawing objects from real life, such as rocks or autumn leaves we have collected, requires children to study the shapes and details of the objects in order to represent them on paper. Mixing paint colors to match the real colors of the objects they've drawn makes children notice the rich variety and subtlety of natural colors. Dictating descriptions of their drawings and paintings offers children the opportunity to talk about what they've observed using descriptive language, another science-related skill.

As a teacher, I was trained to carefully plan my lessons, pre-determining the activities and the learning outcomes I wanted my children to achieve. Over time, I have gradually let go of so much pre-planning. I have learned to trust the natural world to supply an ever-changing, complex array of materials and experiences that children will be drawn to. Nature itself provides the richest learning environment, once you learn to look closely.

Joanne Esser has been a teacher of young children for over 30 years. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and currently teaches pre-kindergarten at Blake School.

Consider this:

- How do you define your role as a teacher when outdoors in nature?
- In what ways and situations do you trust the natural world to provide experiences for children?

Photo by Joanne Esser



Grand New Discoveries

Abbie Whisler and Emily Salistean, United States

As early childhood educators, we celebrate the ownership that children take in their learning. We have learned that through our own close observation and research we can provide gentle facilitation that leads to grand new discoveries. Here, we each present scenarios that exhibit this process in action.

From Abbie:

Eight-month-old Milo was embarking on his first experience away from his parents as he became part of the infant group that I care for. As excited as his parents were to have him start, Milo had a difficult time adjusting. After a week or so, I invited his mother to visit the classroom over her lunch hour. Perhaps having a familiar presence with him in the classroom would calm him, and help him feel more comfortable. As Milo played with his mother, I watched closely and listened, eager to gather new ideas for him. When Milo became upset, his mother picked him up, held him close, and hummed a song in his ear — calming him instantly. Aha!

I started to create opportunities for Milo to experience music at school, and he began to engage more happily in his school day. My co-teachers and I helped him find surfaces for drumming and creating new sounds. As he became mobile, he was able to make choices on his own as he explored the outdoor classroom. Milo became very fond of the wooden marimba, pulling himself up to stand and play. Eventually, he even began to sing! His audience grew, and what was once a self-calming technique has developed into a social experience that Milo can share with his friends, happy now to be enjoying the day together.



Photos by the authors

From Emily:

Max, a five-year-old, joined me in the Dirt-digging Area in the outdoor classroom. "I'm looking for night crawlers, bugs, and worms!" he declared. I joined him with a shovel, and Max evaluated my technique. "You might want a pitchfork like me," he suggested. "It will be better to get down in the dirt." After everything had been arranged, the two of us got to work. After a few minutes, Max pulled his shovel back to discover a single worm in the dirt.

"I can't believe I found my first worm!" he shouted joyfully. A nearby friend had a bowl of worms, and Max decided that would make a good home for his worm, too. As the children filled the bowl with dirt, they begin to discuss ways to add to the worms' habitat. Max was in the center of it all, both protective of his first worm and willing to share the experience with his peers. I had not been involved now for several minutes, but decided to stay in the Dirt-digging Area to take note of what was happening. Over the course of several weeks, Max chose to dig many times, always with the goal of finding worms. I observed that he now asked others to join him. Max, like Milo, had created for himself an enjoyable social experience that he returned to almost every day.



Though they were very different in age, we were able to encourage Milo and Max to develop their confidence and share their learning with others. As teachers, our observations helped us facilitate extended opportunities for the children as they learned more about themselves and the natural world.

Abbie Whisler graduated from University of Nebraska Lincoln with a degree in early childhood and currently works in the infant room at Dimensions Education Programs. She resides in Lincoln with her husband, son, daughter, and pug.

Emily Salistean is an early childhood educator at Dimensions Education Programs in Lincoln, Nebraska. She graduated from the University of Nebraska in 2011.

Consider this:

- How are you closely observing and interacting with the children in your care to facilitate and extend their experiences?
- How do you 'listen' closely to infants to understand what their interests and passions are?
- Having predictable environments and access to materials is one way that children can take charge of their own learning. How do you set up your outdoor space to empower children?

