

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2013

Together in Nature

This edition of *Wonder* explores the following Universal Principle for Connecting the World's Children with Nature:

We believe it is important that adults and families enjoy regular experiences in the natural world with their children.

(Find the complete list of principles in the Environmental Action Kit at worldforumfoundation.org/nature.)

Our children are ready and waiting. They are ready to follow us into the woods and breathe deeply, turn their faces to the warmth of the sun, chase fireflies through the yard, lift a rock and squeal in surprise as insects scurry away. They are waiting to run their hands through the sand, stomp in a puddle, and collect pebbles in their pockets.

Our children are ready and waiting. They are ready for us to follow them out the door, to look into their eyes, to share in their joy, to honor their courage, to be

with them. They are waiting for us to turn off the phone, lighten our schedules, slow down our pace, take a deep breath, and be with them.

So, what are you waiting for?

Adults cannot share with children what they do not have inside themselves. As Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori said, "It is not enough for the teacher to love the child. She (or he)

must first love and understand the universe."

John Muir said, "The sun shines not on us, but in us." Take some time in the next few weeks to explore sunshine with the children and families in your life. Try a few of the activities from the Environmental Action Kit Toolkit for Families to inspire your time in nature. "The Sun's Wonderful Light" Adventure (pp. 28-29) encourages families to have fun with sunlight and shade. Take Action: "Enjoy the Sun's Light" (p. 30), suggests an enjoyable outdoor picnic eating foods that the sun's light has helped grow.

This newsletter edition includes reflections from educators who have found ways to help adults (parents, pre-service teachers, and community members) find more wonder in their daily lives. Filling ourselves up with natural wonder is one great way to enhance our nature experiences with children.



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Future Issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your personal reflections and ideas related to the following *Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature* to Tara (tarah@natureexplore.org):

We believe nature-based spaces should respect and celebrate the site's natural assets, local culture, climate, and history.

Reflection: Involving Families From the Start

from Karen Eilersen, RECE, Canada

Our Nature Classroom journey started with involving families in our outdoor classroom planning. A committee of family members, staff, and management all joined in the planning, implementing, and building of the nature play space at Discovery Child Care Centre in Ontario, Canada.

To involve families right from the start, many family gatherings were held in the outdoor classroom such as: Teddy Bear Picnics, Valentine's teas, Fun Fairs, graduation parties, and so much more. The Centre's Family Handbook has a full page dedicated to our belief that being outdoors in beautiful, natural environments is an essential experience for all children.

At Discovery Child Care Centre, children are given the opportunity to interact daily with materials found in nature, and in the process become thoughtful stewards of the earth we share.

Frequent informational emails and newsletters are sent to families about the outdoor classroom. They describe what the children are learning in this wonderful space, the importance of connecting children with nature, and ideas for them to try at home. Monthly 'discovery cards' are sent home for families; these explain the value of play and include a photo of their child in one of the featured areas. Families are always invited to join in the annual spring planting and to visit the outdoor classroom anytime to stay and play with their child.

Consider this:

- How do you support adults playing in nature?
- What methods do you find effective for communicating with families about the value of daily nature time? How could you modify these to increase their impact?
- What family events do you host indoors at your center that might be held outdoors to increase everyone's connections with nature?



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN EILERSEN



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.

Reflection: Intentionality Makes a Difference

from Molly Gerrish, Nature Action Team 83, United States

The role nature plays in the overall development of children is increasingly recognized by educators and researchers. Early childhood teachers have an important role in introducing children to nature, nature experiences, and promoting feelings of connectedness to the natural world. Research has shown that there are numerous benefits to spending time in nature and exposing children to and utilizing natural spaces with young children (Louv, 2008).

Children's overall growth and development is enhanced by spending time outdoors and participating in hands-on, constructive activities that challenge them mentally and physically. Social-emotional and mental health is also enhanced when children spend time outdoors:

- Children who are exposed to nature and natural elements learn empathy and responsibility for other living things.
- Children involved in caring for a garden, or even a simple potted plant, learn that it takes patience and care for things to thrive.
- Spending time outdoors helps children and adults develop respect for the diversity of other life forms in our world; and they learn to take risks, hypothesize, experiment and try, try again.

We want and need to inspire children to care for their world, and being outside, immersed in that world is the best way for children to take ownership of the land and to become true stewards of it.

With our technology-focused world and overscheduled calendars, children are becoming more in tune to a screen than to the natural world. The way children feel about the world around them is greatly influenced by the adults in their lives. Adults who are not particularly connected to nature themselves typically do not make it a priority to spend time outside with children in unstructured activities, such as climbing, hiking/walking, exploring, or simply taking the time to observe. Nature is a crucial part of childhood and provides numerous health benefits.

In our early childhood education program at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, we are much more intentional in preparing teachers of young children to be stewards of the land, to live sustainably, and to embrace nature in their lives and in their teaching. Several courses have been redesigned to incorporate additional natural experiences and connections for pre-service teachers, including nature-based lesson plans, environmental critiques and design, nature reflection, and sustainability awareness. Additionally, we are in the process of redesigning our on-campus lab preschool playground to be a nature-based playground with equipment and options to embrace our surroundings and seasons.

With intentionality, teachers of all ages and at all levels can incorporate a connection to nature in their teaching and give that gift to their students. This begins with self-awareness and reflection and openness to the bounty of opportunities that nature can provide.

Consider this:

- Reflect on your own feelings about time in nature. How does your attitude affect the children you work with?
- What have you done for yourself lately to renew your own nature connections?
- What opportunities do you have to help other professionals to understand the value of nature?

Reference

Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. New York: Algonquin Books.



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Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

Reflection: Digging Deep! Exploring International Mud Day with Early Childhood Student Teachers

from Pearl D'Silva, New Zealand

What experiences do student teachers studying in early childhood programs have with mud? I explored this idea with a group of international students I taught recently. Students showed each other what they thought of mud by exchanging 'muddy faces': their own facial expressions at the sight of mud. We compared these to pictures of children covered in mud in an attempt to become more aware of our own attitudes and beliefs and how they impact children's perceptions of playing with mud.

We used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a tool to reflect on the influences that have determined our attitudes towards mud. Most students ascribed parental attitudes (verbal and non-verbal) as being a main influence. Culture and geographical demographics, too, played a significant role in determining attitudes towards mud. For instance, students who had grown up on farms shared how those early influences had affected their perceptions of mud. Students from Asian countries shared how mud was used as a traditional home remedy to stop bleeding. We looked at some culture-specific idioms that go down through the ages and reflect negatively on mud. This was really interesting as there seems to be a common thread across all cultures and countries that these students belonged to:

- "You have put mud on my face" (to express humiliation and shame).
- "You are the mud, but will never become the wall" (to indicate that one is useless).

Using recent news articles from two countries, we examined how some cultures and countries use mud as sustenance; students were horrified to note that people in some countries ate mud to save themselves from malnutrition. Yet, as students realized in the latter half of the session, mud can be fun too! We enjoyed some 'muddy moments' as we painted using wet mud (the rains helped make this possible), experimented with 'magic mud' (a spin-off of gloop), and mixed paint and glue with mud to see what would happen. The students were left with the following message — "The world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful" (e.e. cummings) —and were challenged to celebrate International Mud Day with a jump in the muddiest puddle they could find on their way home!

Consider this:

- Did you celebrate International Mud Day this year? You can view photos and stories or post your contributions to WorldForumFoundation.org/mudday.

Reflection: Connect with Community Partners

from Ronda Hawkins and Dee Johnson, Nature Action Team 55, United States

Our Action Team, North Carolina Early Childhood Active Play Alliance, brings together professionals from parks and recreation, government agencies, North Carolina Zoo, universities and colleges, pediatricians, child care programs, nonprofit organizations, and others to focus on promoting practical efforts to improve the health of young children through playful experiences. One of the main events we host annually, Play Daze, is officially held the third weekend in September. However, many communities are planning events to be held during April's Month of the Young Child celebration and other times throughout the year.

At our last Play Daze event, students in Sandhills Community College's Early Childhood Education program facilitated outdoor play for a wide age range of children. The event was a collaborative effort involving Sandhills Community College, North Carolina Zoo, North Carolina Play Alliance, North Carolina Be Active Kids, Southern Pines Recreation and Parks Department, and Southern Pines Library. Our overall goal was to get children outside being physically active, making choices, having fun, and forming friendships. We had over 200 children, ranging in age from three to ten, playing in a local park. The favorite activities were: building forts in the bamboo forest; Mud Café; dirt, water, and clay play; building fairy huts; rope swinging from a tree; face painting; and playing with loose parts.

The creative and coordinated efforts taking place in North Carolina are providing a foundation and sustainable infrastructure for children's play and connection with nature, health, and learning. Come join us on our journey in sharing our collaborative efforts and playful outcomes!

Consider this:

- What is happening in your community to support children's play and connection with nature? How can you join in?
- What community partners could you work with?
- How could you build on the growing awareness of children's health issues as part of your efforts to get children out in nature?

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