



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Nature's Way of Helping Children Be Who They Are

by Tina Reeble, curator of Wonder on behalf of NACC

You are a very special person. There is only one just like you. There's never been anyone exactly like you in the history of the earth, and there never will be again. And people can like you just because you're you.

—Mister Rogers

Today is the last Friday of the school year where I live. As I write this, my sons are finishing portfolios and preparing for final exams. Their efforts are driven by external expectations and evaluations, messaging they're receiving from their teachers... set by the school system to get the best grade because it will impact their high school grade point average, which influences the college they will be able to

attend, which informs the education they'll need for their future career path. I see them tired, defeated and resigned to the judgment they will receive that once again labels them as "needs improvement" or "average." I sometimes lie awake at night pondering my growing concerns about their self-esteem. I think back to experiences in their past when my view of them was very different. When they seemed joyful, deeply engaged and full of questions and ideas—a time when I believe they had the opportunity to grow and learn as their truest selves. As I continue to reflect, thoughts about my own childhood surface. When did I receive messaging that supported my budding self-esteem? Where was I, what was I doing and who was I with?

I find myself in memories of time spent watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and knowing I was a friend that he was inviting in—to help him feed the fish, see what was in the craft cabinet or take a ride on the trolley to see even more friends in the land of make believe. As an adult, I have a new appreciation of how timeless, universal and critical his messages are. Here is one that is really resonating with me. The official trailer for the 2018 movie "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" opens with Fred Rogers stating, "Won't you be my neighbor? It's an invitation to help somebody know that they're loved and capable of loving. Love is at the root of everything. Love or the lack of it."

I invite you to read the reflections shared below and then take some time to ponder:

Where and when are children in your life feeling the most loved and valued—just because of who they are?

How are they learning that even when they do things they shouldn't, they have value?



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC) 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

When can they talk about their feelings—whether they feel rejected or frustrated—and find friends to help them know that they are accepted for who they are?

Who truly, deeply listens to understand, to provide what is necessary to have their emotional needs nurtured?

Perhaps you'll be inspired to look toward connections with nature for some answers. Until next time, be bold – choose to be extraordinary.

Sina

The Magic of the Stump Pile

by Julie Bookwalter and Veronika Vicqueneau, California

It all began with a group of school-age boys who attended our after-school program and who displayed some very challenging behaviors. These behaviors didn't develop overnight; in fact, we had known this group and seen these behaviors developing since they were in kindergarten. Instead of the boys gaining self-regulation skills as they matured, quite the opposite seemed to be happening. Sure, there were times of relative calm and collaborative behavior, but there were also episodes of anger, profanity and physical violence, often in the context of an everyday frustration that frequently began during their school day with a visit to the principal, getting a bus citation, or missing recess as a consequence of non-compliance. Sometimes coping with the time *after* school was more difficult than managing the school day. Dealing with negative experiences at school that lowered their self-esteem, generated anxiety and helplessness, and made them feel unwanted left them little reserve for coping with the afternoon. That is why, for these boys, difficult homework, losing a game, or not being able to clearly articulate their feelings often led to angry outbursts. As professionals, we employed all of the knowledge, techniques and tools that we had acquired over many years, but nothing seemed to work. We began to question whether we would be able to continue to have these boys in our program. Obviously, replicating elements of the school day in our after-school routine (such as multiple transitions and scheduled activi-

ties) was not responding to their needs but on the contrary, was exacerbating their irritability.

Enter the stump pile.

For a period of time, we had been hearing stories from a few of our children about the stump pile. We discovered that it was a kind of kid-made playground in a semi-abandoned field within walking distance of our program. This field was used by gardeners and maintenance workers to dump tree branches, trunk and stumps. From observing these boys and the rest of the children during our summer field trips, we knew that when they were out and about they got along better and were happier. One day we decided to walk a group of these boys over to the stump pile with the hope that they would find again the joy of free play that they experienced during the summer. All of them were very excited to adventure to this promising new place. The boys were speculating: "What if...?", "What about...?" and dreaming about things they would find. Soon enough, a large field of overgrown grasses, trees, enormous piles of stumps and cut tree limbs offered the best playground they could have imagined. Here and there were small teepee-like cabins built with branches and decorated with furniture

made out of stumps and other found materials. A homemade swing and a kid-made zip line bore witness to recent neighborhood children's play.

We gave the boys ample time to explore their new playground, with only a few safety reminders at the beginning. We even brought afternoon snack and water with us so they



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could stay longer without interruption. Our intention was to give them plenty of freedom. Surprisingly, they didn't want to use the original cabins, but wanted to create their own, and each found their own way to claim territory for their own specific needs. One very agile boy climbed a tall pile of stumps, one vigorously whacked the tall grass, one balanced on a large trunk. They began to work as a team without arguments and started collaborating and brainstorming for special tasks such as moving a big trunk or pile of materials. Time flew by, they all came back together for snack and we walked back to our program—their hearts filled with joy.

We could hardly have predicted the changes that we would see in these children's behavior over the coming months. We made an effort to get groups of kids over to the stump pile at least once a week. The stump pile provided an open-ended and challenging canvas for them to build, test their skills, work together, engage in calculated risks, be creative, and engage in real work. The benefits of being out at the stump pile were enormous: increased cooperation and collaboration among children when they had a shared purpose, a reduction in aggression and anger, and more problem solving with appropriate words instead of hands. Being out in nature had a calming effect on all of our children, yet during the school year the challenges of getting kids out of the center were myriad: four bus pick-ups, homework, staffing challenges. We knew we had to figure out a way to make this outdoor adventure happen more often.

Enter the transformation of our own after-school program yard, what we now call the Outdoor Classroom.

Our yard was a blank slate with a field, a patio and sports court, trees and some moveable equipment. Our gardeners maintained it very well—perhaps too well, because there was nothing to climb on, no places to dig or hide, nothing to move and no materials to build with. It definitely needed to be more interesting and engaging, and we started thinking about things we could add and ways that we could make it look more like a natural playground. We were already offering a free flow for part of the afternoon, but in order to make the outside accessible most of the day, we reduced our group time, eliminated some unnecessary transitions, and began to offer snack outside. Children had more free time and enjoyed more open-ended and child-directed activities. We let children dig in an unused corner of the yard, and during our walks, we invited them to bring back some natural elements. Long branches and stumps were in abundance and one of the children started to build a cabin. Soon other children were joining him. Our natural classroom was born!

The enthusiasm of the children led us to collaborate with our gardeners and parents in creating a dry creek bed with rocks, boulders and tall grasses. Our gardeners were asked to let bushes and grasses grow as children were busily building more cabins among them. We took trips to the stump pile and carried stumps back to our yard in a wagon. Over a period of months, we brought branches and twigs, and the boys also proudly brought the hood of

a small construction vehicle that had been discarded. These loose parts became part of a cabin under a large sycamore tree, which has grown and changed as the children have grown and changed. It has been a place where much social learning has taken place. Over the years, herb and vegetable gardens, fruit trees and a natural gazebo have provided additional rich experiences for our children.

Claire Warden said, "Children tell us what they need and want, we have to train ourselves to listen and take note." Our children were not the problem; rather the unmet needs that caused their challenging behavior were the problem. With careful observation, listening and a willingness to change our practice, we were able to respond to their needs, which in turn changed their behavior.

What we have learned over the years is that having uninterrupted time in nature reduced the anxiety, stress and aggressive responses in our school-age children and increased their flexibility, resilience, and self-regulation skills. Nature restored our children's confidence and self-esteem and promoted social inclusion. Episodes of anger, profanity and physical violence gave way to collaboration, cooperation and more peaceful conflict resolution skills. In this unfinished natural canvas, nature's healing power brought back to our children the joy of learning and playing.

It is said, "Not all who wander are lost." Our children were found.

The Extended Day Center UCI (University of California Irvine) offers a developmental after-school program for children in kindergarten through sixth grade, in an environment that fosters cooperative learning, decision-making and problem-solving skills. Children have the opportunity to interact with other children of diverse ages and cultures, and parents are encouraged to be involved as observers and volunteers. For more information, visit: http://childcare.uci.edu/extended_day.php.

Consider this:

- What are some ways that you can include children's active engagement with your outdoor space even more? How could greater open-ended experiences with natural elements benefit the children in your program?
- What techniques are you using to observe, listen to children and then evaluate your practice or environments? How are you incorporating nature-filled play to respond to children's needs?

The Green Circle

Laura Lampley, Tennessee

The Green Circle is a foundational piece of Spring Hollow's philosophy, put into place by our founder, Katherine Ratliff, upon the school's creation 20 years ago. It is an integral part of our community and has been utilized on a daily basis ever since. It provides a common language and concrete example for children, teachers, and parents to use when discussing community, collaboration, and inclusivity.

There is a large green circle painted onto the window of our collaboration room, where class meetings are held. The circle represents our school community; there is room for everyone in it. Upon arrival each day, the children place a small picture of themselves in the Green Circle. This indicates that they are present and part of our circle. There are smaller labeled areas surrounding the circle in which their picture can be placed as the children move through their day. These choices are "I want to be alone," "I need a friend," and "I need a teacher." When the situation has been resolved, they can then move their person back into the circle. We talk frequently about the power of our words, and how our words can make someone feel "out of the circle" or "inside the circle." We focus daily on growing our circle and making our circle bigger and stronger.

Each afternoon we reflect on green circle stories from the day, in which the children identify moments of kindness and collaboration. We may also play games, use puppets, or role-play scenarios from our day to reinforce the idea that everyone can play at Spring Hollow!

The Green Circle is not contained within the parameters of our school; we talk with the children about the fact that their families, friends, and others they encounter (especially as they graduate or move away) are included in our circle. We want our circle to be as big as possible!

Outdoors, the green circle philosophy flourishes, as we incorporate the discovery and exploratory play that naturally emerge here. Collaboration and respect for others and the environment are emphasized. Natural elements, by their essence, provide a rich environment for wonder and learning and accommodate each child's interests and abilities. There are concrete reminders of the green circle found throughout the environment, such as hidden green circles and a green circle swing. Here is a Green Circle story that was documented earlier this school year. It took place in our outdoor classroom, on a large swing shaped like a green circle.

One day, Sarah saw David on the green circle swing and wanted to get on. David slowed down, making room for her to join him. They swung together, laughing. Soon Connor came and asked to join. David and Sarah thought for a minute, then decided that three friends would be even more fun than two, and stopped to let Connor on. They swung higher and laughed louder! Next, Alison asked to ride. All three friends thought for a minute, then announced that four friends would be even better than three would, and stopped to let her on. They swung higher and laughed even louder! "Our circle is getting bigger," said Sarah. "Just like the Green Circle!"



Spring Hollow, located in Franklin, Tennessee, offers an emergent curriculum where student input is the foundation. Children are encouraged to explore, create, and make choices through a variety of media in a friendly and stimulating environment. In this school, relationships are fostered, families are respected, and children are honored. In this school, nature's gifts are valued and children's thoughts are captured. Learning is alive.

Learn more at springhollowschool.com.

Consider this:

- What are some specific ways your outdoor environment supports collaboration and respect for others? How will you enhance your space to do this even more? How will these changes benefit your children and families?

Future issues of Wonder

Do you have an idea or story to share? We invite you to email your ideas, stories and photos that relate to *Connecting Children with Nature* to Tina Reeble: tinar@natureexplore.org