

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Nurturing Conditions for Growth

Coordinated by Kirsten Haugen on behalf of NACC

“Ka Whangaia Ka tupu, Ka puawai”

That which is nurtured will blossom
and grow

– Maori proverb

“We believe it is important that children be supported in developing life skills through holistic nature-based learning.”

– Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature. Developed by the Nature Action Collaborative for Children, a World Forum Foundation Working Group



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

As the one who coined the term *kindergartens*—literally children’s gardens—Friedrich Froebel may have been among the first to note the natural kinship between teaching and gardening. Sir Ken Robinson, like many others, has expanded on Froebel’s metaphor: “The plant grows itself. What you do is provide the conditions for growth. Great farmers know what those conditions are and bad ones do not. Great teachers know what the conditions of growth are and bad ones do not.”

Gardening with children invites them to experience a pathway to wholesome food; to both independence and interdependence; creating order and messing about; planning ahead as we plant the first seeds, and being truly in the moment as we dig in the dirt or eat that first berry of spring. The consistency and rhythm of the seasons is balanced by the endless variations in temperature, clouds, rain, wind and sun, as gardening brings us face-to-face with that wondrous cycle in which life and growth are actually dependent upon death and decay. Gardening builds in each of us a deep relationship with our local environment, with individual plants, with the food we eat, and above all with the children and adults who garden with us.

In the two stories here, from the United States and Zimbabwe, gardening with children merges our work as teachers and gardeners and fosters some spectacular conditions for the optimal growth of both children and plants.

Kirsten Haugen

Gardening with Children in Wyoming

by Allison Bolgiano, director, Discovery Center, Pinedale, Wyoming

Gardening is an integral part of our program. In Wyoming, growing crops can be a difficult task. The students at the Children's Discovery Center are lucky enough to have two structures that allow us to grow in this subalpine climate. Our 240-square-foot hoop house, built in September, 2017, has two growing seasons under its belt and we foresee it to continue to provide crops for us in the future. The growing dome, built in 2012, is quite a fascinating structure. It provides us crops throughout the majority of the year, allowing our preschoolers more success in all stages of gardening. As part of the child and adult food care program, we provide breakfast, lunch and snack to all staff and students daily, at no additional charge. Our students have access to healthy, home-grown produce, further allowing children to help choose and prepare their own food. This program helps establish healthy behaviors that have a lifelong impact on the child's quality of life. The students at CDC learn through nature with a very hands-on approach. Our greenhouses give students opportunities to actively engage in all stages of gardening in a subalpine climate. From prepping the soil, choosing seeds, planting, watering, and tending the students are hands-on; the full circle is completed when they prepare and eat the crops in the kitchen classroom during cooking class.

Our main goal of the summer program is to provide daily engagement with our natural world, integrating environmental education into our students' daily activities. With a heavy focus on nature, our students learn best by using all of their senses. Our students gain a first-hand understanding of local food production through sharing the wealth of crops at the local farmer's market every Thursday during these summer months.

Through gardening, our 4- and 5-year-olds develop a deep connection to nature and to our general curriculum. In the month of September, our focus color was red, and our shape was a circle. While in the greenhouse, one child remarked, "Oh look, those tomatoes are red and a circle! That is what we are learning about!" We also grow a variety of herbs, including basil, cilantro, dill, mint and parsley. Munching on something they had just picked, one child asked, "Yum, what herb is this?"

Other remarks from the children include:

While eating lettuce from the growing dome, "It is cool that you can eat this!"

Remarking on the sunflowers, "Wow! That grew so tall!"

While pulling beets, "Can we use this in our cooking class?"

Eating lettuce in the kitchen, "Oh this salad is from the greenhouse?!"

Learn more at pinedalediscoverycenter.org.



Photo courtesy of Pinedale Discovery Center



During our mealtimes, we serve our food in a family-style setting. While adults sit and eat with the children, the latter serve themselves while learning table manners, language and social skills. Children help set the table and put away their dishes, and then children and adults enjoy social interaction in a physical environment that is comfortable and age appropriate. Our staff are viewed as a model for the children, gently encouraging children to try new foods, educating the children about what they are putting into their bodies (i.e. red foods are good for your heart). The CDC and staff encourage parents to have healthy habits at home. Some parents even participate in family-style setting at their homes.

But not all kids eat well. At the CDC, our “picky eaters” who come often to the CDC really start to enjoy the foods we serve, due to the full circle of gardening. We are creative with our foods, for example using celery, peanut butter and raisins make ants on a log. We also use blueberries and bananas to give our pancakes faces. We talk about how different foods help our bodies in different ways— “carrots help you see in the dark!” Along with mealtimes, we have cooking class, in which the students create meals, typically from the veggies at the local grocery store or from our greenhouse. The process of creating the meal and seeing the finished product helps encourage the students to try each dish. Most children learn by using their sight. In our kitchen we have posters all around, and our head cook always tries to create a colorful plate. Some days, depending on the theme, our head cook makes dishes that are in line with our curriculum.

Parents appreciate the efforts we make at CDC to connect children with nature and a healthy diet.

“As a parent who is very conscious of food choices at home, it was wonderful to have the discovery center provide food that fit with our family’s lifestyle. At home, we limit sugar and offer not only lots of vegetables and fruit but different types of foods,” said one parent. “The ability of the CDC to complement our lifestyle and provide all the children who go there a high-quality food program is outstanding.”



Photo courtesy of the Nhaka Foundation

Connecting Children with Nature at Nhaka Foundation

by Patrick Makokoro, Nhaka Foundation, Zimbabwe

Three meals a day seem normal and a given in some communities and countries around the world but in some, even a single meal is a daily provision that parents and caregivers of young children aspire to give. Not only do the parents struggle to provide an education, but they also struggle to sustain their families with decent, balanced meals. Children living under such vulnerable conditions of socio-economic crisis tend to be less attentive in class due to lack of energy resulting from hunger, depression and domestic frustrations in their everyday lives. Due to the stigma associated with the vulnerability and socio-economic crisis within their environments, these children are often very low in morale and look down upon themselves. Their educational performance is thus affected and they have limited motivation to attend school.

To address some of these issues, Nhaka Foundation partners with schools and parents to develop nutrition gardens. One of the primary goals for its nutrition garden project is to eradicate malnutrition and hunger through sustainable food solutions and production in the most vulnerable communities. To achieve such a goal, Nhaka Foundation provides support through the drilling of deep wells for access to water to support the establishment of nutrition gardens.

Continued on page 94...

The gardens are well kept with a variety of vegetables such as kale, butternut, covo, carrots, beans, tomatoes and onions being grown throughout the year. Children spend some structured time during the day watering, weeding and tending to the vegetables in their garden. The level of enthusiasm and excitement is always palpable during these gardening classes, as children connect with nature, explore and play with mud. It is extremely exciting and very encouraging to see children participate in nature-based activities and the exploration that comes with it. Not only do the lessons help children learn about planting vegetables and legumes rich in all nutrients, they also provide crucial knowledge for the children to be able to continue what they have learnt at school in their own backyard gardens. A bonus for the school is that the vegetables from the gardens are harvested and used for meals supporting the school feeding program, whilst the surplus is sold and funds are used to buy more seedlings, as well as school supplies for children that are unable to bring supplies from home.

Nhaka Foundation (nhakafoundation.org) is a non-governmental organization in Zimbabwe that bridges the gap between the government's policies mandating early childhood development programming in primary schools and its ability to fully realize the implementation of such programs by providing access to education, basic health care and daily sustenance for the orphaned, vulnerable and physically challenged children in the communities it serves in Zimbabwe. Patrick can be reached at patrick@nhakafoundation.org.



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



JUNE 29

SAVE THE DATE:

*Monday,
June 29th, 2020*



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