



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

MARCH/APRIL 2014

The Solace of a Quiet Place

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

We believe it is important for educators to provide children with opportunities for silence and contemplation in natural settings.

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

Have you ever noticed the way some children intuitively seem to know what they need and can seek and find a place that soothes their senses, settles their emotions, opens space within to think and dream? How about other children who seem to be at odds somehow with the flow of activity, interactions, or even themselves within their own skin? We know that nature-filled outdoor spaces where children have regular and mean-

ingful experiences interacting with the environment can be just what every one of these children need.

In his children's book, *A Quiet Place*, author Douglas Wood (2005) writes,

"Sometimes a person needs a quiet place. A place to rest your ears from bells ringing and whistles shrieking and grown-ups talking and engines roaring and horns blaring and grown-ups talking and radios playing and grown-ups. . . . Well, even grown-ups need a quiet place sometimes. But it can be hard to find one. You have to know where to look."

Many of us are committed to creating spaces within our outdoor settings where children can count on the discovery of a lasting 'quiet place' where they can experience their own moments of contemplation and the solace that

nature can evoke. Read the reflections in this issue to learn how people are working to overcome challenges and to give children the gift of nature in different parts of the world.



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 the overall environmental and ethical impact of the design should be considered.

Wonder is made possible in part by a grant from the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. We are very grateful for this support.



Reflection: A Calm Refuge

from Joanne Osterland, United States

The outdoor classroom at the Family Place in Dallas, Texas, is a special environment for children of all ages, as well as their mothers. Those fleeing from domestic violence can find, in our space, a calm refuge where they have the opportunity to relax and reflect while surrounded by nature. A variety of flowering plants provide a visual reminder of the beauty that can be found in the world. Our bubbling rock provides soothing sounds that are calming for all who visit the classroom, and allows for quiet reflection. For those whose lives have been disrupted by violence and chaos, just listening



to the sounds of the water, birds, and sitting in silence in the midst of nature's beauty can be very healing. Mothers often comment that they find peace in this space.

Our teachers use the indoor and outdoor classroom to help children feel calm and comfortable.

- Babies are calmer when taken outdoors.
- Preschoolers delight in the wonders that they see when they observe insects, birds, and other creatures quietly; this helps them learn better control of their own behavior as well.
- Older children can express their thoughts and feelings while journaling, or get lost in their own thoughts while making a collage out of natural materials, or gardening and observing the natural cycle of life.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATURE EXPLORE

All of these kinds of quiet activities help our families to reflect on and process their experiences, leading to healing of the spirit and strength to move beyond the violence they have encountered in life.

Consider this:

- How can you create a quiet place to help children listen closely and focus on the poetry that can be found in the sounds of nature?
- In what ways can you support children's observations and interactions with the living components that nature provides?
- Reflect on ways in which your outdoor space can support healing for your students, their families, and your staff.
- Recent research estimates that between 3 and 10 million children in the United States are exposed to domestic violence every year. We may not always know what challenging situations are affecting the children and families in our care.



Reflection: Something for Everyone

from Josefina Navarro, United States

Principal Josefina Navarro at 4th Street Early Childhood Center in Los Angeles, California, shared the following thoughts on how she and several members of her staff have been working to change their urban, concrete-filled playground to a nature-based outdoor classroom.

I am thrilled with the transformational difference our outdoor classroom and the teachers' new understandings are making for our school. The teachers love the space and have brought the beauty of nature into their indoor classrooms as well. They and the children are creating displays of nature items indoors, and are using natural items to enhance learning with many opportunities for close observation and discovery learning. Teachers newly assigned to our school are reporting that the outdoor classroom and the philosophy of learning make it a pleasure to work here. Parents are also excited about the changes to our space. One parent commented that she felt like she was bringing her child to a park every day. She said to me, "I never dreamed my child would be able to go to school in such a beautiful space. I thought something like this would only be for wealthy children." I often reflect on that comment as I watch her child and so many others joyfully enter the outdoor classroom and quickly seek their own favorite areas and activities. I know that I am seeing children's spirits being filled in ways they never have before.

The most impactful moments come when we witness the transformations in the children. We had one little boy who started the school year and would not speak to anyone. His parents were divorced and his father was very discouraged. He didn't believe anything good was possible for his son. This little boy loved the outdoor classroom. He spent time every day collecting natural items that intrigued him, especially rocks. He sorted them and arranged beautiful creations. Soon, other children came to watch and comment on his collections. This child flourished in his new role of leadership as his classmates joined him to collect more rocks. He was excited about the sizes of the rocks and all of a sudden language burst forth. "Look! I found a big rock," he said. "This one is little, so small." He began to describe the rocks while sharing with the other children. He attracted even more interest from his classmates and was able to share what he knew with his teachers. He inspired more hands-on activities that were brought to the classroom to expand learning and to acknowledge his interests. His class even had a 'rocky' day: painting, counting, tracing, matching, and creating designs with rocks. His father, who was skeptical when he first heard about this, came to see for himself. He was amazed and pleased. This boy needed quiet time, space, and the beauty of nature to process his emotions and get to the place where he was ready to open up to his teachers and peers.

Consider this:

- How do you support the children in your care when they are seeking quiet and solitude?
- What strategies do you use to provide them with space and materials without intrusion from adults or other children?
- How do you communicate and work with families so they see the value of their child's quiet time in nature?

Reflection: Hope for Children in Crisis

from Garene Kaloustian, Nature Action Team 6, Lebanon

A team from Lebanon attended the Nature Action Forum in 2010 with the plan to engage more families with nature. Since that time, the country has experienced the ravages of war which have caused them to patiently adjust their priorities. Still, hope remains.

Lebanon's education system is divided into the private and public sector. Generally, the education level is considered to be better in private schools, with a few exceptions. The Syrian refugee crisis has made things worse for the public education system; Lebanon has been faced with a fast-increasing number of refugees, with the student population K-12 currently estimated at 300,000 (Dahi, 2014). The public schools were able to absorb only 100,000 children, with 200,000 left out of school. The implications of this fast-increasing refugee influx on public schools has been quite burdensome. The system suffers from



PHOTOGRAPHS BY 4TH STREET EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER



a lack of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, schools that are not well maintained, and overworked teachers. Under such conditions, it is unthinkable to organize specialized classes that encourage or provide opportunities for silence and contemplation in natural settings; the priority of all schools is to make sure all children integrate as smoothly as possible within a chaotic environment. Further, the national curriculum has not considered the importance of providing children with opportunities to be exposed to the natural environment, with the exception of some private schools that organize outings in nature or give classes in natural environments.

Given these conditions, there is no awareness amongst the population at-large, and within the level of decision makers on the importance of children in nature. Prior to the Syrian crisis, the priorities were more focused on curriculum development, teacher quality, and professional development. And now, post-Syrian crisis, the priorities are to give Syrian refugee children an education, even if informal.

Lebanon is a country that covers an area of 10,452km. Within this area, the country exhibits a variety of natural environments in its landscape, with a typical green Mediterranean coast and a diversity of arid and green mountains. Despite this diversity, few children in both public and private schools ever have the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful natural environment they live in. Those of us who have experienced the healing benefits of nature first-hand remain vigilant in our desire to connect children with the natural world.

Consider this:

- How can we look to nature for support and solace no matter the challenges we are facing?
- In what ways do you add your voice to the conversation about prioritizing natural connections for every child?
- Where is your quiet place in nature?

Reflection: Keep it Natural

from Wil Maheia, Nature Action Team 25, Belize

Belize is a small country in Central America that is located on the Caribbean Coast. Belize is blessed with many diverse cultures and is one of the few countries in the world that has almost 40 percent of its land in some kind of nature protection. That said, times are changing rapidly in our little country, hence the need to protect what we have. As technologies make it easier for us to see what exists in the 'developed world,' we want to follow those trends. So the challenge exists for us to keep children familiar with their natural settings and to give them an opportunity to experience silence and contemplation.

Recently, we have been visiting the schools in the indigenous Mayan communities and urging the teachers to consider this perspective. Although new roads and modernization are coming through many villages, there is no need to try for every place to fit in with the rest. For example, we have seen aid agencies basically demand that classrooms be made of concrete, which becomes very hot in tropical environments and is less natural than traditional Caribbean buildings. When meeting with groups we:

- urge teachers and parents alike to keep the children in as natural an environment as possible.
- speak of the need for a shift in attitude that supports the children truly interacting with nature.
- encourage adults to accept children getting mud on their hands and feet.
- help teachers to see the benefits of allowing children to wander in the woods so they can spend some quiet time exploring and hearing the sounds of nature.

Most of these indigenous villages are in remote, rural areas and at the moment still surrounded by nature. We hope our messages are reaching teachers in time to preserve our natural heritage. The bottom line is that we encourage parents and teachers alike to keep their communities as natural as possible.

Consider this:

- What aspects of your native natural habitat can you highlight in your outdoor space?
- In what ways does the space of stillness and reflection that you are creating for children and adults also celebrate your natural heritage?
- How are you sharing your beliefs about the importance of connecting children with nature with other teachers?



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE EXPLORE