



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

Natural Life Lessons

Nature has the power to guide children to many of life's truths. Regular time spent in nature-filled environments provides opportunities for children to develop a deep, personal connection to the natural world that can help them call upon their own inner strength; gives beauty to inspire the depth of their actions; courage to follow their own path; hope to trust in the goodness of life; and compassion to forgive others and themselves. In this edition of

Wonder, committed educators from across the globe reflect on this idea and offer different perspectives as they respond to the Nature Action Collaborative for Children Universal Principle:

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

Nature Action Collaborative for Children



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.

Working Forum on Design and Nature

Rotorua, New Zealand
March 11–14, 2015

Join architects, landscape architects, planners, educators, environmental educators, funders, and elected officials in a first-of-its-kind event to explore high-level universal principles necessary in designing effective spaces for children. Participants will work in multidisciplinary teams to create indoor and outdoor designs for three programs in various parts of the world. These programs have either been affected by natural disasters and/or serve vulnerable children and families.



Photo by Nature Explore

Learn more and register at www.worldforumfoundation.org/design2015.

Future Issues of *Wonder* We invite you to email your ideas, stories and photos that relate to the following Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature to Tara Hild: tarah@natureexplore.org.

We believe it is important for educators to allow enough time each day for children to explore freely in nature-based spaces.

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Photos provided by Dana Youkilis

Reflection: Fresh and Tasty

from Dana Youkilis, United States

“What did you cook today?” Caleigh’s mom asks her four-year old daughter excitedly, as she comes bounding out the door of her preschool, Children’s Nest Early Childhood Education Center in Merrick, New York. Caleigh’s mom trails behind her, beaming. “She gets so excited every week.” Her daughter eagerly takes a sample of the recipe for the week: Cucumber Salad. Caleigh and her mom are coming to shop at Children’s Nest Farmer’s Market, held each Thursday during dismissal hours at their child care center.



The market is part of the Long Island Farm-to-Preschool Program, sponsored by Child Care Council of Nassau, Inc., through a grant from the New York State Department of Health. The program’s mission, to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables in underserved areas of Long Island, is carried out by holding a weekly farmer’s market at each of the three selected child care centers. The program also assists the schools in setting up garden beds on preschool grounds. Students help tend the gardens throughout the season, and often attend the market with their class.

Caleigh and her mom stop by the manager’s tent for food samples and to pick up their weekly \$2 coupon to spend at the market, a copy of the weekly recipe, and a pair of red potholders — the free kitchen tool giveaway of the week. Many more families come by the tent over the next hour, excitedly tasting samples before moving on to the farmers’ stands to pick up some fresh goods to take home.

Farmers have a colorful selection of produce laid out for purchase. Farmer Casmo’s orange cherry tomatoes are a huge hit with the kids. He encourages all of the children to taste them, saying that they’re as sweet as candy. And sure enough, the kids agree!

The preschool years are a particularly great time to teach children about food, a part of nature that is very familiar to them. Education about where food comes from and how it is grown reaches children at a critical time when healthy habits and taste preferences are being formed. When children use all their senses to explore food in the garden, at the market, or on the table, they are much more likely to try new foods. One parent enthusiastically reports that her son picks out two to three items at the farmer’s market each week. At first he chose only foods he was familiar with, but after a few weeks he began to choose and enjoy many new vegetables. She said the program not only helps to significantly increase the family’s fruit and vegetable intake, but also encourages them to cook more creatively at home.

In the coming season, Long Island Farm-to-Preschool plans to expand their education content to incorporate more lessons with students and parents. They are also working to connect the centers with the farmers so that local, fresh produce can be utilized in meals and snacks served to the children during the school day.

Dana Youkilis is the Farm-to-Preschool nutritionist at Child Care Council of Nassau, Inc., based in Franklin Square, New York. The Long Island Farm-to-Preschool program is working to increase access to fresh, local fruits and vegetables for underserved areas of Long Island. She can be reached at dyoukilis@childcarenassau.org.

Consider this:

- How can food and gardening activities at your center — such as planting, harvesting, and meal preparation — support a child’s understanding of cause and effect?
- How can children use critical thinking to examine, compare, and select which fruits or vegetables to purchase?
- What observations and identifications can be made when working with food (e.g., whether a vegetable grows in the soil or above ground)?

Introduce children to the pleasure of a “rainbow” of foods as they learn about healthy eating and the value of plant biodiversity with the “Rainbow on my Plate” activity on page 81 of the **Environmental Toolkit for Educators**.

www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/educators/



Reflection: Learning for Life — Understanding the Natural World

from Vanessa Lloyd, New Zealand

For the last five years I have been working as an early childhood educator at Childspace Early Learning in Wellington, New Zealand. The centre features a secret garden that has ladders, treehouses, tunnels, and natural terraces. The garden has an abundance of trees to climb, shrubs to explore, and vegetation to taste. The sun shines through the canopy in summer with the songs of native birds creating a magical atmosphere, offering gifts for the senses.



Photos provided by Vanessa Lloyd

Across the road from the centre is a forest that has a bush track following a stream to a meadow. The children have opportunities to explore this environment by walking the tracks, building huts, wading in the stream, and picking wildflowers in the meadow. These outdoor learning experiences promote an abundance of life skills, such as a sense of freedom, imagination, creativity, and independence. Each of these natural environments is appreciated by the children, parents, teaching team, and the wider community.

Natural learning environments offer a variety of experiences that help children develop life skills through holistic nature-based learning. Holistic learning nurtures not only cognitive, social, and physical dimensions, but also emotional, spiritual, and cultural dispositions for learning. These dimensions are equally significant in understanding oneself; they help us make connections with the land and other living things.

Learning about our identity and connection to the land is celebrated in our Māori culture through the concept *Tūrangawaewae*. Literally *tūanga* means “standing place,”

and *waewae* means “feet.” This entire word translates as “a place to stand,” and it refers to a place where we feel especially empowered and connected. These places are our foundation, our place in the world, our home.

Children thrive on feeling a sense of belonging and affiliation to people, places, and things. It is this relationship with the natural world that encourages children to protect, nurture, and preserve the wonder of nature and its precious resources. Creating learning experiences in nature provides opportunities for children to observe the world around them in meaningful and often spiritual contexts.

Learning in nature is paramount in children’s holistic development, empowering children through a sense of wonder and respect for the world, and their own ecological identity. This connection to the earth ensures that children grow up as confident learners — healthy in mind, body, and spirit. It also solidifies their sense of belonging, and deepens their knowledge that they are connected to a place: their home.

Vanessa Lloyd is the manager of Northland Childspace in Wellington, New Zealand. The centre provides a nature-based programme for infants, toddlers, and young children. This programme strongly believes that education must promote egalitarian, geomantic, and humanitarian components to learning.

Consider this:

- How does your outdoor space help children feel empowered and connected to the land?
- What can you do to offer children more experiences to physically explore and interact with their environment?



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Reflection: The Powerful Teaching of a Deer Carcass

from Rachel Larimore, United States

Life skills are inherent in any preschool program, but nature-based approaches sometimes provide opportunities to address deeper life issues such as the concepts of life, death, and care for others. This respect for living things and understanding of death as a final event is demonstrated in several aspects of our program. At Nature Preschool, we spend half of every session outside and work to bring nature into every area of our indoor classroom.

Every day, our nature preschoolers go on a hike outside the play area. Usually these hikes include play-based activities for children to explore and learn about nature in some way. A hike might be to the pond to search for frogs, or it might help the children connect to a visit from a veterinarian as they practice care-taking during pretend play with stuffed animals that are 'hurt' in the woods.

There is usually at least one hike that is a little outside the norm, for example, when the group happens upon an animal, sometimes a deer, that has died in the woods.

Questions, of course, immediately come flowing out. They run the gamut, but often include things such as: "What happened to the deer? Where did its eyeballs go? What are all the tracks in the snow around the deer?" Through this discussion, children usually have curiosity about the animals that are visiting the deer when the children aren't present.

To help the children find answers to their questions, the staff set up motion-activated cameras that are used to observe which animals might be passing by. To understand how the camera works, students pretend to be animals in front of the motion camera in the classroom. Then, the camera is placed in the woods to capture images of animals that visit the deer. Regular visits to the deer allow the students to see the decomposition process, observe tracks of animals that have visited, and to retrieve the photos for viewing back in the classroom. Language-rich conversations emerge that are related to the circle of life — life, death, decomposition, and so on.

In addition to this hike, there are many opportunities to talk about life and death on other hikes, such as when we're collecting animals. For example, a visit to the pond usually involves collecting many tadpoles. There are always a few children that want to hold and squeeze the tadpoles, but of course, self-regulation is critical for the health of the tadpole!

This activity opens a conversation about empathy and taking care of other living things. Inevitably, a tadpole is lost in the process. While unfortunate, this does allow for a conversation on the finality of death. There's no way to bring that tadpole back. Similar dialogue results through free-play when children find insects, spiders, worms, and so forth that they want to collect.

Nature-based programming provides a unique opportunity for these real, tangible experiences related to life and death, care for others, and self-regulation. These are deep, difficult topics, but they are equally as important to a child's healthy development and they open the door for powerful adult-child interactions.

Rachel Larimore is the Director of Education at Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan, which includes the administration of the nature-based preschool program that serves 88 children each year. She is also the author of Establishing a Nature-Based Preschool. She can be reached at rlarimore@chippewanaturecenter.org.

Consider this:

- How do you provide opportunities for children to practice self-regulation in your program?
- What provocations and experiences are available to children in your outdoor space that invite debate and deep thinking?

Photos provided by Rachel Larimore

