

Close Observation

Nurturing Children's Skills through Design and Nature

by Gera Jacobs



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Photo by Gera Jacobs

Children are miracles. Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children's care. When we invite a miracle into our lives, we prepare ourselves and the environment around us. We may set out flowers or special offerings. We may cleanse ourselves, the space, or our thoughts of everything but the love inside us. We make it our job to create with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle. Action follows thought. We can choose to change. We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums.

— Anita Rui Olds (as cited in Curtis & Carter, 2015)

The Power of Nature and Design

Those of us who have the privilege of working with and on behalf of young children have some of the most important jobs on the planet. I have long agreed with Maria Montessori that one of our primary roles is that of designing and preparing an environment for children that makes the most of the precious time they are with us. Montessori believed that it was important for children to be able to observe living things firsthand. She designed children's environments with plants and animals, and provided opportunities for children to care for them. Her school in Rome had trees, garden plots, chickens, rabbits, and

pigeons (Rivkin, 2014).

The programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy, known throughout the world for their high-quality early childhood programs, also realized the incredible importance of children's environments. In Reggio Emilia they consider the environment to be the *third teacher*:

- They design their environments with rich materials that prompt children's learning.
- Their design plans include large windows that provide an ever-present opportunity for children to observe the natural world.
- Their environments reflect their image of children as strong, capable, full of potential, and deserving of respect and honor.



We, too, can use nature and design to create spaces that reflect the respect we have for children and invite them to explore, wonder, and learn. Intentionally-designed spaces with natural



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elements have the power to encourage children to observe closely and take the time they need to really notice and appreciate the amazing world around them. This is especially needed today in our fast-paced, hurried world.

One place to begin is to think about our entryways. What do children and families see and experience as they enter the building, their classroom, the outdoor space? Is there something we could add that would invite them into the space and offer new possibilities for learning and discovery? Some programs have added archways, both indoors and out, made from simple materials such as fabric, bamboo, or other natural material. The entryway could also include

a *welcome* in the home languages of the families in the program.

Designing to Help Children Acquire Skills for Success in Life and Learning

Research has shown that children who have positive approaches to learning — curiosity, imagination, eagerness, persistence, focus, flexibility, willingness to take risks, and good problem-solving skills — will be more successful in school and life (Jacobs & Crowley, 2007). We need to design our environments so that children have opportunities to develop these ways of approaching new situations and opportunities. Children will learn to become more comfortable

Intentionally-designed spaces with natural elements have the power to encourage children to observe closely and take the time they need to really notice and appreciate the amazing world around them.



Photo courtesy of Scarbrough Center, Nature Certified Classroom in Sioux Falls

taking on challenges when we provide materials, such as a natural balance beam that can help them learn they won't always be successful, but they can continue to try and get better.

Children are young scientists by nature. We can help them cultivate the habits of scientists: observing, predicting, measuring, drawing conclusions, and good problem-solving — skills they will need in all the other subject areas as well.

Create interest areas with materials that will beckon children to spend time, engage, wonder, and observe the world around them.

- Design spaces that allow children to become immersed in activities.
- Plan a garden with children that allows them to plant seeds, weed, water, and care for plants until they have the joy of harvesting.



Photo by Gera Jacobs • Childspace, Wellington, New Zealand

- Furnish areas with tools children need to observe closely and use their senses.
- Provide rulers and other measuring devices for children to track plants' growth. Include adjustable profile gauges or *shape rulers* sold at home improvement stores that children can use to push against trees and other surfaces to measure curves and notice their surface features.
- Place magnifiers in the Discovery Area and have cameras available for children to take pictures of what they are exploring, both inside and outdoors.
- Encourage children to design and build bird feeders to hang outside a window or under a tree and supply children's binoculars (or even make some from paper towel rolls) to help focus their attention.

Many parents hope that early childhood programs will help their children be 'ready' for kindergarten and wonder if their children should be learning to sit quietly and do paper-and-pencil tasks. However, when kindergarten teachers are asked what skills children need in order to be successful in school, it is positive approaches to learning and

Photo by Lori Harris



strong social and emotional skills that they name: feeling good about themselves as capable learners; forming relationships and acting cooperatively with peers and adults; and being able to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Well-designed spaces and natural materials can help children acquire these skills.

At the 2015 Working Forum on Nature and Design, designer Adam Bienenstock (www.adambienstock.com) shared his view that something fundamentally changes when you add natural materials to the environment, including sand, water, and wood. He believes that something is children's respectful behavior. Think about how you might infuse more of these natural materials into your space:

- Panels with translucent colored plexi-glass can provide needed structure, while allowing colorful light to pass through.
- Wooden furniture and equipment not only add a natural element, they are durable and attractive as well.
- Sand and water can be soothing and calming.

- Open green spaces can help to calm and renew children's spirits.

We can design our indoor and outdoor environments so that children have opportunities throughout the day to develop a positive sense of themselves as competent, capable individuals:

- Make sure that materials are at the children's level and that they are able to access them independently.
- Provide a variety of materials such as wooden blocks, ramps, and balls that afford fun and challenge, contributing to children's sense of self-esteem and mastery.
- Offer spaces and materials that allow children to play individually, but also in pairs and small groups to facilitate their developing relationships with adults and other children.

Thinking about designing to support children's social and emotional development can change the whole tenor of our program, fostering a community of thoughtful learners who feel good about themselves and care about each other.

Interest Areas that Promote Learning, Appreciation for Nature, and Joy!

Ideally children can spend the majority of their day in interest areas, both inside and outdoors, that provide opportunities to play, make choices, explore, and experience real joy in learning about their world, how it works, and their place in it. Although each interest area actually presents opportunities to learn in all areas of the curriculum, the chart on the following page highlights some of the most natural opportunities for learning in these areas. Challenge yourself to think about ways to offer these areas both indoors and outside.

The Multi-faceted Role of the Adult

Our role begins with designing indoor and outdoor spaces that will allow children to wonder, explore, observe, and learn. There are a number of

resources, such as Nature Explore (www.natureexplore.org) that can help us in this role. Designing our environment is a never-ending, but rewarding job that requires us to be keen observers of children, their interests, needs, and progress. We need to use the information gathered from our observations to renew

the environment and ensure that it is continually breathing new life into the children. Effective environments become even more amazing when adults interact with children, and help them become more deeply engaged. Asking open-ended questions and asking children to think about why something might be

Nature and Design Features

Interest Area	Consider Adding Materials such as . . .	Social and Emotional Skills Developed Here	Positive Approaches to Learning Developed Here	Additional Learning that Can Take Place in the Area
• Discovery Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • variety of natural materials • quality magnifiers that allow close observation • paper and writing materials for sketching observations • small pets, aquarium with fish • variety of plants, seeds, and planting materials • commercial or homemade light table or overhead projector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curiosity • focus • information-seeking • engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • math • language and literacy
• Block and Building Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • range of blocks, including natural wooden blocks • ramps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persistence • initiative • risk-taking • flexibility • effort • engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • math • language and literacy
• Library Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cozy, inviting areas for children to curl up with a good book, possibly a loft area, screen tent, pillows, bean-bag chairs • variety of books, including both fiction and non-fiction • CD player for books on tape or books read online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning about emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • language and literacy
• Art Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easel • open-ended art materials, including natural materials such as pinecones and shells that encourage children to be creative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expressing emotions in positive ways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • imagination • invention • flexibility • engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • language and literacy • the arts
• Dramatic Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • variety of props that could include project themes such as 'camping' with tent, sleeping bags, backpack, pots • 'farmers market' with produce stand and produce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cooperation • building relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engagement • resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • language • the arts
• Sand and Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sand and water table or large containers to hold these elements • variety of toys, cups, tubes to make boats and explore 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning ways to relax and relieve stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eagerness • problem-solving • maintain focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • math • language and literacy
• Music and Movement Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • musical instruments • pots, pans, large spoons • scarves and fabric 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning positive ways to express emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curiosity • engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • language and literacy
• Gardening Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • space for planting vegetables that children can eat • gardening tools and gloves • seeds, tree seedlings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curiosity • eagerness • persistence • maintain focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science • language and literacy
• Messy Material Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • variety of natural materials, which could include 'tree cookies' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-esteem • cooperation • developing relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiative • risk-taking • flexibility • effort • maintain focus • resiliency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language and literacy • the arts • physical

happening will enhance their learning. Simply sharing experiences together, and helping children observe and notice patterns, cycles, and the wonder around them will build the sense of being a community of learners in our space.

Think carefully about the design of each area of your indoor and outdoor space:

- What invitations does the area present to the child?
- What messages will it send to the child?
- How will this space promote children's development?
- Are there other elements we could add, change, or eliminate to make it more inviting and provide more opportunities for growth?
- Are there elements we could add that would allow children to use more of their senses?
- What tools could we add to help children observe more closely and engage more deeply?
- Are there elements we could add to help each child feel competent and masterful?
- How can we interact with children in this space to maximize their experience?

In a Nutshell

Our role is to design indoor and outdoor environments that will cultivate curiosity and imagination and inspire children to become deeply engaged in play and learning. We can arrange our space into interest areas and provide tools to enhance children's ability to closely observe and marvel at the beauty of the world around them. Interacting with children will help them become



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more deeply engaged and notice the wonder around them. Observing children, what they are able to do, and what they need helps us understand the importance of our role in ensuring that our environments are places that will continually promote children's sense of wonder and joy in learning.

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