

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

JULY/AUGUST 2015

Something for Everyone

This edition of Wonder is focused on the Nature Action Collaborative for Children Universal Principle:

We believe nature-based spaces should provide multi-functionality/multiple possibilities.

So what are the 'multiple possibilities' that your outdoor space makes possible? In this newsletter, we have collected a range of ideas from nature for inspiration to unite a community, all in an effort to help you reflect on your current practices and perhaps consider new or expanded ways that you might highlight your outdoor area to help you meet your overall mission and goals.



Photo ©NatureExplore

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 that regular connections with the natural world encourage children to develop feelings of unity, peace, and well-being as global citizens.

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Share your Mud Day stories and photos:
www.WorldForumFoundation.org/nature



Reflection: Let's Take Our Cue from Nature

from Jeff Lindstrom, United States

As we advocate for and foster stronger relationships between children and the natural world, it is not only important that we create natural settings, but that we look to the natural world for inspiration and ask ourselves what it is about nature that is so engaging. The changing of the seasons, the sounds, the smells, being surrounded by life everywhere we look. Each time we head to nature, we experience the excitement of seeing something new, something beautiful, and something we may never see again.

When we design and create stimulating spaces for children, we need to remind ourselves of the wonder that nature creates in us. If there is promise that each time a child engages in a space there is the opportunity for new experiences, different ideas, and multiple solutions — like we find in nature — then our children will approach each experience in that space with renewed enthusiasm.

Every design is relative to its surrounding environment. While resources may be limited and regulations excessive, the incorporation of more natural materials affords us the opportunity to expose children to an ever-changing environment that offers new possibilities. Whether it is a decomposing log, large moveable parts that allow children to construct freely, or a diverse plant palette that changes with each season, there is promise that every time a child visits that space, their experience will be different from the last.

It is also important that our nature-based environments celebrate the fact that each child is incredibly unique and support the possibility of multiple solutions/uses. What may be a climbing element to one child may be an area of refuge for another. One of the challenges of design is not only to take yourself back in time, but to also look through a different lens. Children play in a variety of different ways; not every child engages in play the same way. While high-activity areas are generally associated with the term 'play,' we must consider the entire experience we are creating and be sure to support not only various levels of physical engagement, but cognitive and social/emotional engagement as well.

Consider this:

- How does the design of your outdoor environment support a variety of creative play opportunities?
- What design additions/changes can you make to support whole-child development?

Children Express Their Uniqueness through Creativity

Whether they act out stories, make music, paint, or draw, they make visible what children know, what they feel, and who they are. The creative arts are evident in myriad ways in an outdoor classroom, among them creative dramatics, music, and visual art.

Child's Touch Child Care • Thornton, Colorado

Our outdoor classroom continues to be a favorite area for teachers to instruct the children in a natural setting. The kindergarten class utilizes this area quite often during the nice weather for their daily lessons. This area also serves as an outdoor theater, complete with large curtains and a sitting log for wonderful child performances. We added a new puppet stage, made from natural materials, to hold animal puppets in the outdoor theater area, providing a new creative outlet for our children. Now they can choose to perform while wearing special animal costumes or use the puppets to display their acting talents.

Elmhurst Academy of Early Learning • Elmhurst, Illinois

Our infants were encouraged to work together to cover a large stone with freshly fallen leaves from the Discovery Play Garden. This was a project inspired by artist Andy Goldsworthy's work with natural materials. This type of exploration not only provides a unique tactile experience, but also encourages both fine- and large-motor development.

Consider this:

- Try a new idea that highlights the connection between nature and the creative arts.



Photo: Palm Beach Day Academy

A Place Where Spiritual Connections are Made

St. Augustine Mission School • Winnebago, Nebraska

St. Augustine Mission School serves children from the Omaha and Winnebago Native American tribes. Brenda Murphy, a science teacher of Native American ancestry, started the Medicine Garden along with the assistance of Michelle LaMere, a Winnebago tribal member and mother of a tribal student. Brenda has used herbal medicines for years, due to her allergic reactions to industrially manufactured medications. As a result, both her knowledge of the plants and her deep respect for them provide unique resources for the children.

Many concepts from botany and other sciences are learned in this garden. Yet more importantly, Brenda shares her spiritual connections with the plants. For example, whenever part of a plant is removed for study, an offering of water is made, conveying gratitude for its medicinal and/or educational benefits. No more is removed from a plant than is necessary for study, and children understand this orientation towards the natural world. One child exclaimed to Brenda, "Teacher, teacher, there's medicine everywhere!"

Consider this:

- How do the natural elements in your space help children learn more about their local and historical culture? Why is this important?

Fun and Learning for the Whole Family

Discovery Child Care Centre • Winnipeg, Canada

Many family gatherings are held in the outdoor classroom, such as Teddy Bear Picnics, Valentine's Teas, Fun Fairs, graduation parties, and so much more. The Centre's *Family Handbook* has a full page dedicated to its belief that being outdoors in beautiful, natural environments is an essential experience for all children. Ongoing informative emails and newsletters are sent to families about the outdoor classroom and what the children are learning in this wonderful space, the importance of connecting children with nature, and ideas for home. Monthly 'discover cards' are sent home for families. These cards explain the value of play and include a picture of their child in one of the areas. Families are invited to join in the annual spring planting and to visit the classroom anytime and to stay and play with their child.

Family awareness and involvement continues through daily / weekly posts on Facebook, weekly tweets through Twitter, and a monthly *Nature Newsletter* to all families. The latest Annual Fun Fair and Teddy Bear Picnic events reached approximately 150 families. In addition, all families are invited to the annual Mud Day Celebration.

Consider this:

- Are you taking full advantage of your outdoor space to increase family involvement in your program? What are some other ways you can do this?
- Share "Your Beautiful Journey" Activities and Tips for Families (pp. 39-41 of the Environmental Toolkit for Families, available at www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/families/)



Photo: St. Augustine Mission School



Time in the Garden Nurtures the Community

North Branch Arts/Creativo! • Chicago, Illinois

This site, as part of Chicago's climate action plan, is certified as a City of Chicago Green Corps garden to reduce emissions.

While Creativo! is the corporate sponsor of the garden, the completion of the project spring-boarded into the launch of a non-profit community arts center called North Branch Arts.

This garden is open to the public and is the site of storytelling, arts and crafts classes, and gardening demonstrations. In partnership with MedSpa next door, an additional grassy area of the parking lot was included as garden space. Produce from the organic garden will be donated to a local shelter for homeless people, and supplement the meals and snacks of the preschool and after-school programs.

Engraved bricks, with family names on them, invite people to spend time in this calm, green oasis. Trees and native plants are scattered throughout the garden, creating a warm welcome and sense of peace and tranquility. Huge stumps dot the climbing area and allow visitors to survey the grounds from multiple perspectives.

Time in the garden allows for exploration, learning, and skill building. As children dig and climb, they successfully master physical challenges, while gaining self-confidence and a sense of control over their environment. Maneuvering rocks, wooden blocks, shovels and buckets, and even tomatoes, provides children with many chances to strengthen visual-spatial, mathematical, and abstract thinking skills.

North Branch Arts hosted the local community's first Garden Walk, offering planting, art, and nature activities for all ages, while the whole community checked out local gardens. Local Girl and Boy Scouts earned badges for spring and fall clean-up in the classroom, as well as for developing container plantings. The local community association also hosted a tree lighting event in the space in December with treats, Santa, and singing.

A "Yes" Environment

Grace Primary School • Houston, Texas

The Primary School community wanted the learning center to be a relaxing, beautiful space where children could develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world and strengthen their skills in close observation and classification. The Outdoor Learning Center was created and is used both for investigating various subjects, and for the learning that is inherent in child-directed free play. The activity areas foster a range of academic inquiry and imaginative play. STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) curriculum is being used in the older grades, and the preschoolers are learning the basic concepts, both formally and informally, in the Outdoor Learning Center.

When the preschool play area had a composite floor and a big play structure in the middle, there were only two options: Children were climbing and sliding or they were walking around and really not doing much of anything. There was nothing to explore. Children were very limited in their options. There were many challenging behaviors, children acting out, and others just camped out, waiting to go back into the air conditioning. With our new Outdoor Learning Center, things have changed dramatically and there is now something to do for every child. Very rarely do children need to be redirected because it's a "yes" environment, and it's their environment; it's student driven.

Now, there is something for everyone. There's room to run, for those who want to run. Children who are super-active can engage in energetic play. There is a brick path they can ride their bikes along, and a pizza garden, butterfly garden, and fruit trees, which create opportunities for planting flowers, herbs, and vegetables by the classrooms. There are areas for creative expression, such as chalk on the sidewalk or the chalkboard double doors. Art easels, sensory tables, and toys are brought from inside to provide additional activities. There are even secluded areas where children can hang out on a bench and daydream.

Consider this:

- What are you doing to be sure your nature-based space truly provides a wide range of opportunities to meet the varied interests and needs of children?
- How can your connection to nature be strengthened?



Photo: North Branch Arts/Creativo!