



Seeing and supporting children's kinship with the natural world

by Deb Curtis

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

Rachel Carson

Study the photos above of children engaging with the natural world. Notice the reverence in their hands, the amazement in their eyes, the joy in their body language, and their complete attention and curiosity. When we observe children closely, it is obvious that they have an inborn sense of wonder and affinity for nature, which enriches their lives and ours.

Yet children are spending less and less time outdoors so they are losing their enchantment with the natural world, and even worse they come to fear it. Information has become available regarding the alarming consequences to

Deb Curtis has recently been spending her days working side by side with teachers, delighting in and studying the daily adventures of infants and toddlers to learn to really see them. She wants to thank Francine Robinson, Valerie Thomas, Tameika Reese, and the children of the YWCA Field Center, and Kasondra Brown and the United Way Bright Beginnings Toddler Cohort Teachers who took these photos, captured the details, and discovered the deep meaning of this amazing time with the children.

children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual health and well being when they don't play outside. And needless to say, our environment will continue to suffer if children grow into adults who don't have experiences where they learn to love and protect the planet.

In response, there are many local, national, and international initiatives designed to promote nature education and keep children connected to the natural world, including the Nature Action Collaborative for Children through

the World Forum Foundation (www.worldforumfoundation.org) and the Arbor Day Foundation Nature Explore program (www.arborday.org/explore). These resources help us remember the vital importance of protecting children's kinship with nature.

Offering children experiences with nature is difficult

It's true that many child care centers are lacking in natural environments. The emphasis in programs is more often about rules and regulations for



children's health and safety, and concerns about allergies, the weather, and getting dirty.

It's also difficult for us to take groups of children into natural environments with inadequate ratios of adults to children. There are even more challenges to providing experiences in nature when we work with groups of infants and toddlers. Add to that adults who are disconnected from the natural world because they spend very little time outdoors, and those who have fear and anxiety being in nature. It's no wonder we stay indoors most of the time.

Cultivating our own connections to nature

In order to move beyond the barriers, fears, and inconveniences, it is crucial that we find ways to cultivate our own deep connections to the natural world. We can learn about the importance of being outdoors from books, seminars, and the Internet, but the best teachers we have are the children we spend our days with as they embrace Mother Nature.

Searching for the natural world

I recently shared a remarkable experience in nature with a group of toddlers and their teachers from the United Way Bright Beginnings Quality Improvement Program in Houston, Texas. For a number of years I have been working with small cohorts of teachers to study approaches to teaching and learning. Our recent focus was on supporting children's connections to the natural world. Our plan was to provide children with experiences in nature and then observe and study their responses and the role we could play to strengthen their connections to the natural world.

I was concerned about how much nature we would find surrounded by the glass, steel, and concrete buildings of the city and in the manicured office parks and schools where these programs are located. But it was important to use the environments in the child care centers where the teachers worked so experiences with nature would be easily accessible. My hope was that teachers would rediscover and fall in love with Mother Nature right outside their doors, so they would be moti-

vated to share these experiences with their babies.

Reawaking our connections

We started our work by scouting the yard to find natural materials for the children to explore. Our ongoing study of children over the years helped us have a good idea of what they would be drawn to: items with texture, color, and movement, and loose parts to investigate and transform. And, of course, we made sure everything on the playground was non-toxic.

From what initially looked like a place lacking in natural wonder and beauty, we discovered that the simple splendor of Mother Nature surrounds us if we just stop to take notice. As they searched the yard the teachers called out to each other — "Oh," "Ah" — and squealed, eagerly sharing their excitement about the insects they found, the complex structures of leaves, and the eloquence of an open flower they could see through magnifying glasses.

We spread a blanket on the ground, brought out some trays and baskets, and used the materials we collected to create a beautiful invitation to share with the children. We were astonished at the transformation we made to the yard. Right outside the door of this typical child care setting Mother Nature was waiting for us with grass, rocks, leaves, pods, and small creatures to attract and hold the children's and our attention for hours, days, even a lifetime.

Learning from children

Toddlers often have a reputation for a lack of self-control and short attention, so we were surprised when the children didn't dive right in to play with the materials. Instead they approached the invitation gradually with looks of awe, wonder, and respect in their eyes. When the children began to engage with the materials, they observed closely, touched, rubbed, and



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squeezed to study all aspects of the objects. They quickly learned to use the magnifying glasses to enhance their view. The toddlers worked with a quiet focus and purpose. Several times the children put the berries and leaves up to their noses to smell them. Again, we were surprised because none of the children put anything in their mouths. Their attention was focused on the many other interesting things they could do with the objects.

The children's close study led to a variety of explorations and new discoveries,

including making sounds by shaking the leaves, tapping the rocks together, and dropping the pods on the trays and into the wooden bowls. Each of their investigations inspired further investigation: dropping objects into bowls evolved into careful sorting and arranging of the berries and plums into the bowls and baskets. A few of the children seemed to be noticing and classifying by size as they placed the berries in the containers.

As toddlers often do, their attention turned to exuberant ways to make the natural objects move. This developed into a group effort as the children invented a game together to roll and bounce the green berries on the large black trays. We were delighted as we watched them laugh uproariously, shaking the tray until all of the berries flew off, and then enthusiastically filling the tray and starting the game again.

We also observed the children as they gently studied the insects, intently watching their movement as they crawled around on the ground and on the children's hands. The children were eager to have a relationship with these fragile, living creatures. We marveled at the affinity and care for living things these babies bring to their investigations.

After more than an hour we reluctantly interrupted the children's exploration for lunch. During our time together the children:

- Helped us see nature's patterns, textures, rhythms, and all the possibilities for engaging our hearts and minds
- Showed us the roots of scientific inquiry
- Taught us how to use our senses to examine and make discoveries, to try out ideas, notice cause and effect and the impact our actions have on the world around us
- Gave us the gift of seeing the joy, mystery, and excitement in the simple beauty of nature
- Reawakened our own sense of wonder and appreciation for our kinship with the remarkable natural world surrounding us.

Studying and celebrating our experiences

We spent a full day reflecting on our experiences with the children in the natural world:

- We studied photos and video clips and analyzed the children's ideas and interactions.



- We spent more time outdoors near the office building where we held our meeting.
- The teachers gathered treasures from the natural world.
- They created stunning displays of natural materials.
- They gained inspiration from their observations of the children to study and enjoy what they found.
- They wrote letters of appreciation to Mother Nature to reinforce their new connections.

Letter to Zion

Experiences with children in nature can reawaken our own connections with the natural world and move us to share these joyful experiences. An inspiring example of this comes from Shannon McClellan, a consultant with the Bright Beginnings program. She has become committed to sharing the natural world with the children of Bright Beginnings, as well as with her own grandchildren. After a recent trip to the beach, she wrote this lovely letter to her one-year-old grandson Zion as a keepsake for her time with him (see adjacent box).

Shannon's loving words and experience with her grandson show us the elegant simplicity and powerful impact sharing nature with children can bring. You, too, can follow Shannon and Zion's tiny footsteps and become a companion for children in the natural world.



Letters of appreciation to Mother Nature

Dear Purple Flower,

You were beautiful when I laid my eyes on you peeking through the fence, swaying in the wind. When I pulled you off the branch, you were so full of life. I put you in a paper bag and brought you inside to show my toddler teacher friends. When I took you out of the bag, you looked lifeless. Your beautiful petals started to close up and got a little wrinkled. So now when I look at you I wish I wouldn't have picked you off the branch. I should just admire you every time I see you when I pass by.

— Lorna Patterson

As I walk through the path of beauty the smell and look of the beautiful, bright pink flowers catches my eye. The texture of the green leaf calls me over. I accept the invitation. I introduce myself by feeling the pattern of the leaf. I am amazed. I notice the beautiful color of leaves. "Purplish color," I say as I begin to count them one by one. Finally I reach the end and I'm done. I notice a dead bunch of leaves. This lets me know that winter's near.

— Daun Jones

Today was your very first visit to the beach in Galveston, Texas. You were very excited when I put you down to experience the soft sand. You wandered off from time to time as if you already knew your way around. You noticed your shadow as you took one step at a time. You looked down as your feet began to sink into the soft, grey sand. As I watched, I wondered what you were feeling as you took those tiny steps. You never took your eyes off the water. What you were thinking as you saw the waves coming toward you with such force?



Zion, what a brave person you are.

You walked around without any fear of an environment you have never seen. Watching you enlightened me to how important it was for you to have this experience. It made me feel wonderful knowing I gave you this opportunity. My heart was filled with joy knowing that you are a person who is curious and imaginative and able to explore as a scientist. You helped me realize that nature is an expression of reality that can touch me in a sensitive and passionate way.

United Way Bright Beginnings is a quality improvement program for non-profit child care centers in the Greater Houston area with a focus on the training and education of child care teachers and directors. United Way Bright Beginnings is a collaboration between United Way of Greater Houston, Collaborative for Children, and University of Houston with exclusive funding provided generously by Exxon Mobil.