Wonder
NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2010

Our path to an outdoor classroom

by Sarah Bishop, Marlys Vollegraph, and Deb Curtis

We were thrilled to see Peter all grown up. He was an articulate, imaginative child when he attended our school during his preschool years. He was back for a visit and we were eager to ask him about his best memories of the school. He quickly replied, "I can't wait to see the play yard." As we entered the yard he cried out; "Where's the tall grass?" We were shocked at his response. With a limited budget, we worked hard to round up the resources to develop the grassy area into a bike path. We protested his disappointment, suggesting that the bike path was a great addition to the playground. He would have none of this point of view, remembering his adventures hiding among the tall grass.

The staff of our school has always had mixed feelings about this one-acre yard. We strongly believe that children deserve a childhood filled with experiences in the natural world. Yet, supervision and maintenance is difficult, families often have worries about their young children negotiating our big space, and as educators we want to provide more focused learning in this environment. Our initial ideas were to add more traditional features. Fortunately, we realized that Peter's perspective is similar to the many children we have asked about our yard. Yes, they use the standard equipment — bikes, slides, and swings — but their favorite areas are the natural spaces filled with 'loose parts' from nature. And when asked to help us design the yard, the children's views were loud and clear: Mother Nature needed to be our guide!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

With grants from Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and the Nature Explore Program of the Arbor Foundation, we had an opportunity to develop the yard. Our work with these groups helped us develop a visionary plan for an Outdoor Classroom.

We turned to our local community for support. We offered multimedia presentations to various groups citing the sad consequences of children not spending enough time in nature. We solicited local businesses, Rotaries, Kiwanis clubs, and individuals, and, amazingly, everyone has come through with tremendous generosity. Not only have we gotten donations of materials and funds, but folks have been willing to put in many hours of volunteer labor to help us transform our space. For example, when we worked on the deck, we had Rotary members volunteering their weekends to lay the foundation, a local lumber mill donated the building materials, and a high school class worked for months on a metal fence consisting of flowers, frogs, and bugs. The end result is a deck that is highly functional in design and truly unique and beautiful in its details.

The children have been a part of these activities every step of the way. They helped design and then tested the areas and the structures. When we were creating the native plant corridor, we scraped up sod and dirt in order to lay down wood chips for the kids to run

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.
Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com or call (800) 221-2864.
Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.

and ride their bikes. This dirt and grass was dumped on an existing pile that is to be developed later. To heck with the pathway that we built — the kids loved to play King of the Mud Hill, especially after a big rain! They had a great time running up and down the hill, dragging tires, drain pipes, and slides over to the dirt pile. We were definitely on the right track in creating a natural play space!

The entire process has been a rewarding experience. We've built strong connections and relationships within our school and with the wider community. The teachers have learned to use the Outdoor Classroom as a part of their daily activities. But the best gift is to watch the children dash to their favorite place to build complex structures, use the shaded platforms to create dramatic stories, or linger to pick fruit and tend the garden. We still have a ways to go to reach our vision. Our future plans are to open our Outdoor Classroom to the larger community. We want other educators and parents to see the possibilities for learning in an Outdoor Classroom. Our biggest wish is that all children will have abounding experiences in the wonder of nature!

Resources

Dimensions Educational Research Foundation:
www.dimensionsfoundation.org

Nature Explore Program of the Arbor Foundation:
www.arborday.org/explore

Marlys Vollegraff has worked in early childhood programs for many years as an educator and administrator. As director of the Burlington Little School she took leadership to find resources and inspire the community to work toward the dream of a nature playground.

Sarah Bishop is a landscape designer and mom of two young children. She has a passion for creating natural spaces for children and has volunteered as project manager for the Burlington Little School nature playground.

Deb Curtis is an educator for children and adults. She has been involved with the Burlington Little School (www.burlingtonlittleschool.com) for 20 years. She currently travels widely leading seminars about the importance of rich childhood experiences including adventures in nature. Visit Deb at www.ecetrainers.com.

Nature Action Collaborative for Children
WORLD FORUM FOUNDATION

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.

Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at:
www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

AFRICA
Irma Allen, Mbabane, Swaziland
Hadijah Nandyose, Kampala, Uganda
Sebastian Chuwa, Moshi, Tanzania

ASIA
Bishnu Hari Bhatta, Kathmandu, Nepal
Swati Popat, Mumbai, India
Raed Abu Hayyaneh, Amman, Jordan

NORTH AMERICA
Linda Esterling, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States
Berta MacGregor, México City, México
Jeanne McCarty, Fort Worth, Texas, United States
James Wike, Memphis, Tennessee, United States

OCEANIA
Toni Christie, Wellington, New Zealand
Gillian McAuliffe, Floreat, Australia
Fiona Robbe, Arcadia, Australia

EUROPE
Helle Nebelong, Gentofke, Denmark
Claire Warden, Perth, Scotland
Marc Veekamp, Apeldoorn, Netherlands

SOUTH AMERICA
Martha Cecilia Fajardo, Bogota, Colombia
Caroline Hudicourt, Petion-Ville, Haiti
Wil Maheia, Punta Gorda Town, Belize

SUPPORT TEAM:
Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer, Redmond, Washington, United States
Nancy and John Rosenow, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States
Tara Hild, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States

PRODUCTION:
Scott Bilstad, Seattle, Washington
Carole White, Lopez Island, Washington

Ecological literacy

Helping children feel at one with nature by Angelo Andreetto

We live in a new world. A complex world where some people are fighting changes to their lifestyles. They do not feel comfortable with the message that they share responsibility for the world in which we live. When we talk to young children, they bring with them the same questions and worries adults have about changes to their lives. These children have internalized the message that garbage disposal is a very serious problem. However, when we ask for solutions from the children, they use phrases they hear from adults: "Somebody needs to do something!" or "People need to stop throwing out so much garbage" or even "Nobody wants to recycle!" However, who are the people that are going to do something? Who are the ones that are going to stop the accumulations of garbage? Who are the ones that are going to separate the garbage for recycling?

Surely, children will be the ones who evoke a magical solution.

A focus on developing ecological literacy in early childhood education programs helps children build their own code of ethics. That is, values that guide their personal and collective actions, what they judge to be right and wrong, and what they value in themselves, each other, and in nature. At its essence, this code of ethics arises from our relationship with nature: if we don't feel that we belong to nature, we feel that we are superior to it.

Initially, we must cultivate in children the belief that they are one with nature and all other living creatures. Through this message, we can awake in children the desire to learn more through observation and touch, seeking the importance of the I and of the you. As Martin Luther King said:

"All the men are stuck in a web of reciprocity; interwoven in a unique tissue of fate. Whatever affects one directly also affects all indirectly. I cannot be what I should be until you are what you have to be and it can never be what it should be until I am what I have to be."

This feeling needs to be nourished through daily practices at school and at home. When the child reaches affinity with life, the earth, the water, then the child will be 'ecologically literate.' As children become sensitive to the environment around them, they become a part of it. It is at this moment that they are finally able to grasp what sustainability is. It is from this realization that a discussion about solutions to environmental issues becomes possible.

Angelo Andreetto is an environmental specialist from Santo Andre, Brazil.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.
Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com or call (800) 221-2864.
Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.