

# Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

JULY/AUGUST 2012

## Extend International Mud Day into Everyday Learning

The universal principle for Connecting Children with Nature we want to explore in this issue is:

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

A special day of celebration can help you either begin or extend the great experiences that take place regularly on the 'ordinary' days you have with children. For example, you can take your extra-ordinary experience of International Mud Day and continue your celebration into everyday experiences with dirt and soil. The Environmental Action Kit can help. (Go to [www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature) to find the Environmental Action Kit. Click on the Toolkit for Educators and *Have An Adventure* with "Let's Dig In" on page 39-41.) Frequent opportunities to investigate soil are one way to do this. Digging, sifting, exploring and analyzing dirt can be just as extraordinary.

Here are a variety of perspectives from educators around the world who are ensuring that children are learning with nature every day.

**We Dig Dirt** by Tina Reeble,  
Dimensions Early Education Programs, United States

For the teachers and toddlers that I work with, digging dirt is a favorite activity in the outdoor classroom. The children dig with their hands and with tools. They regularly fill, carry, and dump small pails and containers of all sizes. The physical benefits of this 'big body play' and 'real work' are substantial. They are often imitating work they see their parents and caregivers do at the same time they are developing muscle strength and body competency.

Exploring the soil is another part of the fun. Excitement over discoveries of insects (especially earthworms), rocks, and wood chips are frequent highlights. Opportunities to experience pre-math concepts such as volume, depth, weight, and part-whole relationships abound. The best part is that the children can take the lead in these experiences, and directing their own learning is most rewarding.

Consider this:

- How do you encourage children to freely explore outdoors? How do you feel about times when you and the children get dirty?
- What tools can you provide children to encourage them to explore soil? (Small hand tools, buckets, tubes, rocks, and shells can all encourage discovery. What else?)

PHOTOGRAPH BY DIMENSIONS



## Each Day Outdoor Play! by Shelina Bhamani, Consultant, ECD, Pakistan

Children who have nurturing and stimulating play experiences throughout childhood have better academic outcomes. Play outdoors where children connect with nature supports curriculum and holistic well-being. Nature helps teachers incorporate hands-on experiences with sensory stimulation (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, etc). Acquiring new information in this way is effective for children's new learning and for building on familiar concepts. For instance, if an educator is teaching about 'Birds' in Grade 1, she can take students outside to observe the birds and record their observations. When this happens frequently, children's experiences develop their internal understanding of the way the world works. It is also one of the best teaching strategies!

Consider this:

- What elements of nature can children closely observe in your setting? (Ants, worms, spiders, and squirrels can all spark interesting ideas and questions. What else?)
- What tools could you provide to help children with their observations? (A magnifying glass or binoculars can help children focus. What else?)
- How can children record their observations? (Clipboards and paper for field notes, cameras, and specimen jars encourage children to work like scientists. What else?)



A picture from remote area of Pakistan of children experiencing independent outdoor play.

## Lessons from Mother Nature by Deepak Prasad Aryal, Shree Himalaya Higher S.S., Nepal

The class teacher of Grade 3 thought it would be nice to take the children on a field trip, bringing them a bit closer to nature. I was asked to accompany the group and take photographs. Our group looked like they were about to embark on a great march, their heads buzzing with ideas and their faces full of excitement.



In this photo we see how spending time with nature is part of family life in this community in Nepal. When adults listen closely, students share with us what they know and understand about their world in authentic ways. A field trip to a garden becomes an extraordinary celebration of their everyday work with soil.



We were fortunate to witness some of Mother Nature's beauty as we saw the sun rise above the fog. The birds had already begun to stretch their wings and were hovering over the treetops (probably in search of worms) and chirping away quite musically. Despite the sunlight, it was still quite brisk and we could see the local farmers returning from the dairy after selling milk.

We reached the garden full of winter vegetables. Most of the children were familiar with the winter plants in the garden, rattling off their names. One boy said, "It's cauliflower. My mother has also planted some! She planted it in September or October and it will be ready in three months." This child has little need to be taught basic agriculture as he has already learned so much from his experiences at home. Another student excitedly pointed out a radish and went on to share all in one breath,

"You eat the root, the part that is under the ground, you can cook it as curry, make pickle, or eat it without cooking as salad!"

Consider this:

- How can you support children's care-taking of plants in your program?
- How do special events and field trips celebrate nature and children's home lives?
- What do you know about plants native to your region of the world? Can you incorporate some of these into your program's outdoor space?
- How can you use the photos and stories in this edition of *Wonder* to spark a conversation about the kinds of things children grow and eat in different parts of the world?

**Personal Reflections: Life Lessons from Mud** by Christine Kiewra,  
Nature Explore Education Specialist, World Forum Foundation Global Leader, and Farm Girl

When I close my eyes and recall my childhood, I am blessed with magic moments that come rushing back: sounds, smells, and images filled with the thrill of catching lightning bugs at twilight, the delight of gooey marshmallows roasted to perfection, the feel of the cool creek on the edge of the pasture with small stones begging to be collected, and the heavy scent of fresh-cut alfalfa hay. I open my eyes and wonder, will the children in my life today have rich, nature-filled memories to draw from like I do? How do those wonder-filled experiences influence the people we grow into?

This question prompted me to write down my top five reasons to play in the mud (and how mud play is a metaphor for all regular and uninterrupted time in nature):

1. **Sensory:** *Mud is best explored with your whole self, using all of your senses as tools. It feels good, smells good, and can even sound good! The deeper you 'jump in' and push yourself beyond your comfort zone, the more you discover.*
2. **Timeless:** *Mud can be played with over and over and never wear out. Our ancestors likely played with the same mud our children play with today. Experiences with mud can help children develop a sense of being connected to something bigger than themselves.*
3. **Messiness:** *Playing in mud is messy. When you invite messiness into learning, it increases the complexity and opportunities for children to solve problems and figure out how the world works.*
4. **Flexibility:** *There is no right way to use mud. It can turn into anything your imagination conjures up. The longer and more often you play with it, the more delighted you are with what you discover and create. Leading scientists today who are studying soil have discovered that in addition to some harmful bacteria, there are also beneficial bacteria that may boost our immune systems.*
5. **Universal:** *All over the world children play in mud. The more we know about the things we have in common and share with people everywhere, the more likely we are to understand and care about each other.*

When I watch young children transform sticks into powerful, swift horses, sand into majestic castles, and mud into sumptuous cakes, I am convinced that nature has the power to mold us into the best people we can be. It also seems clear that the more time we spend in nature, the more benefits we reap. As parents and educators, we can ensure that today's children benefit from nature and become passionate about its care. The excitement around the globe that has been generated by celebrating International Mud Day is really powerful. I challenge you to keep the joy alive by spending daily time in nature for the rest of the year.

Some things to consider:

- Are you outdoors often and long enough with the children in your care?
- Is nature such as plants and 'loose parts' readily available in your outdoor space?
- How are you supporting children's explorations of nature?
- How are you communicating the value of regular time in nature to families and encouraging them to incorporate nature into their home lives?
- What will the children in your life today remember about nature 30 years from now?





“Your outdoor playscape can be a limitless place of curiosity and imagination for your children. Outside they will learn and discover many things about life and the world around them. As you begin to design this new world or give your current environment a facelift, wouldn't it be great to bring the children into the design process and tap into that imagination? Of course! Not knowing how to begin this process, however, well-meaning adults often give it a quick try by asking children, ‘What do you want on your playground?’ Unfortunately this approach starts children off on the wrong foot by immediately limiting their vision to what a playground is and what they have seen on other playground sites. ‘Seesaws, swings, monkey bars,’ and then in turn ‘Spiderman’ this, or ‘Barbie’ that. It's a pointed question, to be sure. Who could blame them for their answers? Mass-produced man-made equipment with licensed brand identities and flashy logos are intended for children to recognize and ask for by name. But we are looking to create something very different for your children. We want spaces of creativity and beauty that recognize our individuality and the uniqueness of our children. But we would also like their input and ideas. How can we do this? And more excitingly, how can we take the next step and make the designing and dreaming part of curriculum and learning?”

“For starters, when gathering information for your playscape a better question to ask children is, ‘What do you do when you play?’ This question leads you down very different roads than the first question. Children immediately tell of running, jumping, hiding, sitting with friends, riding tricycles, making art, yelling, building, digging, splashing, and climbing. When you are designing spaces for children, this is what they do and these are the play opportunities you want to design for. Your end result can take many forms and be made from many different materials.”

Rusty Keeler, *Natural Playscapes* (Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 2008)

## NACC NEWS

[www.WorldForumFoundation.org/nature](http://www.WorldForumFoundation.org/nature)

NACC News items are continuously posted on the website.

Send information about upcoming conferences and/or reports of past conferences to [tarah@natureexplore.org](mailto:tarah@natureexplore.org) — Check it out!

### Future Issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your personal reflections and ideas related to the following *Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature* to Tara ([tarah@natureexplore.org](mailto:tarah@natureexplore.org)):

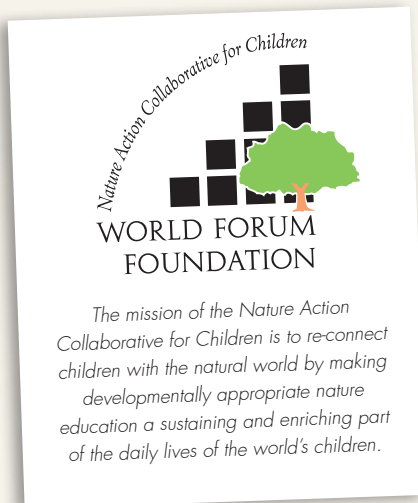
***We believe it is important for designers and educators to support children's appropriate risk-taking and adventurous play in nature.***

## Wonder

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



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