Making Time for Learning in Nature

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

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

As you read the reflections that follow consider the intentional, thoughtful choices that you make as they relate to each aspect of this principle:

- Enough time
- Daily
- Free Exploration
- Nature-based space

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 it is important for families to understand the value of children’s daily connections with nature.

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Reflection: In the Flow of Their Day
from Ellen Veselack, United States

Picture this: You are at work, focused on a project and you feel like you are really making progress. Then after 20 minutes, a bell rings and you are required to pack up, move to a new space, and begin a new project. This continues throughout your day. Frustrating? You bet! Counterproductive? Absolutely! Yet many programs have schedules that mandate children move from activity to activity throughout the day. It is critically important to the process of learning that children have large blocks of uninterrupted time to fully engage in their work.

At Child Educational Center in La Canada, California, we have designed our daily routine and staffing models so that children can select their own experiences, based on their interests, on materials at hand and teacher provocations, either in the indoor or outdoor classroom.

All of our classrooms have direct access to their Outdoor Classroom and we have taken advantage of this by creating an indoor-outdoor flow for children. Children have the freedom to move in and out throughout the morning or afternoon so that they can sustain an experience over time. Once our doors are open at 8:00 am, it isn’t until 11:00 am or so that they are asked to make a transition to a gathering time or lunch. This gives them three hours in which to engage with their peers, teachers, and the environment, unimpeded by artificial interruptions—but facilitated by appropriate teacher engagement—in the flow of their day. (Snack is offered as another experience and they come to snack as they are hungry.)

Each day, children have an abundance of natural materials available to them and this rich array of ingredients for learning pulls them into experiences and sustains their attention over the course of the morning or afternoon. We have observed children engaged in a child-initiated experience for up to 1½ hours, working with sticks, stones, logs, pinecones, long branches, and any number of other natural materials. Teachers set up the environments to be interesting, beautiful, and provocative. These provocations draw children in, pique their curiosity, and invite them to engage. In this context, teachers observe children carefully and make decisions about what support children might need from them. Sometimes teachers simply remain nearby and watch, ready to step in if and when it is necessary. Other times, children invite teachers into their play, or teachers identify a need for stepping in and asking questions or offering observations in order to move the experience along or to enrich the learning that is taking place.

Now picture this: In the sandbox, a small group of children are busy digging a river, exploring how the water flows, and discovering the strength of the water pressure. Over in the garden, two children are observing a butterfly that is flitting from flower to flower drinking nectar. They chatter with one another about the colors on the wings and how the butterfly eats. Then they gather clipboards and colored pencils to sketch the butterfly. Out in the open grassy area a group of children have collected sticks, logs, and rocks to create a boat, complete with rafts, oars, and fishing poles. All of these children have the opportunity to stay with their activity until they decide they are finished. This kind of learning environment allows children to explore more deeply, revisit their investigations, and work collaboratively with their peers. Engaging? You bet! Productive? Absolutely! What a wonder-filled world this is.

Consider this:

■ What are some ways that you can adapt your schedule or daily routine to regularly provide your students with an extended period of outdoor time?

■ How are you supporting child-initiated experiences in your outdoor space? What can you do to enhance or enrich the opportunities your students have to connect with the natural world?
Reflection: Nature-Inspired Connections for East China and University of Nebraska Pre-service Teachers
From Kimberly Blitch, United States

A union has developed between the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies) and East China Normal University (ECNU), based in Shanghai, China, to promote intercultural understanding of early childhood education. This intercultural connection, led by Dr. Michelle Rupiper, has spanned approximately three years and has hosted several students to both Lincoln and Shanghai since its inception. During its third, and most recent visit to Nebraska (October 2014), ECNU Education Majors collaborated with UNL Early Childhood Curriculum students to engage in a workshop focused on learning through everyday connections with nature.

A typically gilded-and-gorgeous Nebraska fall day provided an ideal venue for the students to rediscover their sense of wonder in nature, something that, for many, has been long-lost over the years. Some 40 students trekked outdoors on UNL’s beautiful East Campus, taking in the landscape and unique architecture and exploring the native (albeit reformatted) terrain. Delighting in a pile of leaves, meandering along a tall grass prairie path, and collecting acorns fueled the students’ curiosity and close observations of the natural environment. This time spent together in nature inspired rich conversations and planning among the students; students were laughing and connecting with each other while taking group photos (‘selfies’) and swapping stories.

Upon their return to the Home Economics classroom, they were prompted to reflect on their nature walk. Students were encouraged to represent either a natural treasure that captivated them on their walk or salient elements of their outdoor experience. They quickly dove into simple art supplies (clay, pipe cleaners, colored pencils, crayons, and paper) to create original works of art with focus and fervency. Valuable peer-to-peer discussions followed that emphasized:

- the value of frequent, unhurried time in nature for all children.
- how nature inspires creative expression with open-ended materials.
- the rich, holistic learning that occurs when children explore nature.

Later, the students shared their art with the combined ECNU and UNL group, revealing details of their childhoods and, in many instances, identifying similarities between them despite contrasting cultural contexts. For example, the students spoke about delighting in the beauty of nature and discovered that ‘dandelions’ were common and endearing to both groups. The ECNU students remarked that, due to the cityscape of their community, they often visited and played in parks. UNL students, conversely, commented that they had opportunities for play in the wild-scapes of family farms and acreage, most often with brothers and sisters. Regardless of the way in which nature was accessible to them, the students became aware that everyone enjoyed nature in their childhoods and, in some cases, played with the same vegetation or wildlife in the same ways (e.g., picking flowers, selectively choosing rocks, and snatching a dandelion or two). In this way, it seemed, nature unified and connected them to one another. By simply allowing them to explore the natural environment together, they were able to identify commonalities with one another that perhaps would have gone unnoticed.

The students were introduced to the importance of well-designed, nature-filled outdoor learning environments and the holistic learning that can occur in them. They came away with an understanding that the Earth is a diverse playscape in and of itself, one that must be both treasured and shared.

It is our goal that the reach of these lessons extend far beyond the unique intersections of these students. We trust that we have planted invisible seeds of learning and teaching so that children everywhere can learn in, and from, our natural environment. And, hopefully, there will be enough dandelions to connect us, too.

Consider this:
- Have you had an experience with nature that helped you connect to another person? What are some ways that you can support more connections like this for yourself, staff, and students?
- Have an Air in Motion adventure with your children. Look for ways to use these activities to connect children to our natural world and each other! See pages 22 and 23 of the Environmental Toolkit for Educators. www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/educators/
Reflection: Giving Your Children the Gift of Time

from Diann Gano, United States

Under the Ginkgo Tree in Rock Island, Illinois, is an outdoor and nature-based preschool program. As we enter our fifth year as a certified Nature Explore Classroom, we continue to tweak our program to give our students the gift of time. Our students need time in nature, time in the outdoors, and time learning social skills with their friends. How do we balance outdoor time with curriculum?

Like the children in our care, we have learned that all changes start with baby steps. In the early years we started by taking our learning centers outdoors. We have all heard that anything that can be taught indoors can be taught outdoors. It is true, but it takes a bit of rethinking and re-adjusting how we teach to make this happen. Baskets, trays, and crates became the containers we used to easily transport materials outdoors.

As our program evolved, we began to adapt our resources to materials that could be left outdoors and would blend in with the natural resources and setting of our site. We also looked for ways that our curriculum could be built into our outdoor classroom. For example, in our outdoor life science center:

- We plant pumpkin seeds in the dirt, which now makes up our garden.
- We observe students’ verbal and social skills slowly growing alongside the pumpkins as the garden area is carefully watched over.
- We see the children pick the pumpkins and line them up by size or color. We have a math curriculum!
- We respond to four-year-olds Vera and Elizabeth’s requests for markers and paint to decorate their pumpkins. Now we have an art area!
- We observe that without the need for teachers to plan, a simply constructed store made by five-year-old Owen suddenly appears as he sells pumpkins to his friends. Now we have a dramatic play area!
- We see someone drop one of the pumpkins and it splits open. Now magnifying glasses come out and we are exploring the inside of pumpkins and finding … seeds!
- The pumpkins will continue to be played with for weeks to come in large and small increments of time.

Creating a store or studying pumpkin seeds inside of a pumpkin takes longer than a 20-minute allotment of ‘center’ time. Our experience with children has validated for us that we need to eliminate the rigid classroom schedule and remind ourselves that true learning is all-inclusive of time and children and the materials involved that make learning meaningful and relevant.

We need to trust our belief in our outdoor classrooms. Trust in ourselves and in our children. Learning will happen the way that learning was meant to happen. Not at a desk, not in a circle, but outdoors surrounded by friends and nurturing adults and butterflies, and birds, and worms, and other treasures waiting to be discovered.

Our best advice to others is to start small, with baby steps, and see where the journey takes you!

Consider this:

- Notice the variety of ways the children were able to use their own ideas with pumpkins. What are some other open-ended natural materials that you can make available in your setting?
- As you support child initiated experiences with these materials and record your observations, develop techniques to relate your observations to your curriculum goals.