The Children & Nature Network

Ensuring That All Children Can Spend Quality Time Outdoors

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Founded in 2006 by a small group of educators, writers, and community leaders who shared a deep concern about children’s disconnection from nature, the Children & Nature Network (C&NN) supports and informs organizations working to reconnect children with nature. The network provides opportunities for sharing information, success stories, and resources for building community coalitions to ensure that all children have a chance to experience nature firsthand. The organization’s Web site (www.cnaturenet.org) offers families and educators the latest news and research as well as practical advice, including ways to apply newfound knowledge at home, at school, and in the community.

The founders, who now serve on the board of directors, created the Children & Nature Network to raise awareness about the importance of getting children outdoors and engaging them in learning about the environment. C&NN works with other outdoor education organizations to showcase regional and local nature education initiatives, but looking beyond formal environmental education efforts, C&NN also has a broader focus on making sure that children have opportunities to simply play and explore outdoors.

One goal of C&NN is to reduce the disparities in children’s outdoor play and the health and mental health outcomes associated with...
a lack of outdoor experience. For example, some children have little or no opportunity to spend time outdoors because their neighborhoods do not have safe outdoor spaces in which to play and/or there is a lack of affordable transportation to nature destinations within the region. The Children & Nature Network gathers and makes accessible research that documents disparities, as well as research that demonstrates effective ways to reduce disparities, with an eye toward informing and inspiring citizens and policy makers to work together to address disparities in their communities.

Why is it important to focus on nature education and outdoor play?

Many children today are very sedentary, and getting them outdoors where they can be active can have obvious benefits for health and fitness. Even when children are involved in organized outdoor sports, they may not have much active play time and may spend large chunks of time on the sidelines. But when children engage in less structured outdoor play in natural environments, they typically sustain moderately energetic activity over a longer period of time—the type of activity that is particularly important for health and fitness. There is a growing body of research on how spending time outdoors benefits children’s development beyond the more obvious physical benefits. This research shows that children are more imaginative, creative, and cooperative when they have opportunities to play outdoors (Burdette & Whitaker 2005). And they experience less stress and are more able to focus their attention when they have opportunities to get outside and connect with the natural world. Although there still is a need for more rigorous research on the specific effects of nature experience and the best ways to incorporate it into children’s daily lives, there is enough evidence to show that spending time outdoors every day in natural environments has a positive impact on children’s development (Kellert 2005).

Teachers, programs, and families can do many things to introduce children to nature and to give them the time and space needed to explore outdoors. People often assume that outdoor education or nature education must take place in semirural settings. However, urban settings can also offer ways to spend time in nature outdoors. Small amounts of nature can really offer huge opportunities. For example, urban teachers can easily plan a nature walk or a time to study clouds.

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Nature walks

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Whether they live and attend school in the country, a suburb, or a city, children can benefit from nature walks. Before the walk, teachers and children can discuss what they might find. Setting a goal can be a way to focus children’s attention—especially if this is their first nature walk. For example, a teacher can ask the children to count the different types of plants they find or the number of birds they see in the sky. City plants include grass growing in a sidewalk crack, and most cities have pigeons.

Low-cost supplies support and encourage children’s nature explorations. Give each child a bucket or plastic container in which to collect rocks, pinecones, leaves, and other natural items. Later, create a classroom nature museum for children to display and study their collections. They can use inexpensive magnifying glasses to examine the characteristics of the items they collected. Place books in the museum so children can learn more about nature.

Or put a circle of rope or a plastic hoop on the ground and ask children to observe what’s inside the ring. This activity helps children to carefully examine and study the life they see in a limited environment. Disposable or digital cameras allow children to document what they see outdoors. Photos can be displayed in the classroom, shared in family newsletters, or used to create books.

Studying clouds

Children can study clouds in any outdoor setting. They can take towels outdoors, lay them on the playground surface or the grass, and lie down and watch the clouds. This could start as an observation. Ask children, “What kinds of different clouds do you notice?” Or encourage imaginative thinking: “What creatures do you see in the clouds?” Teachers can read aloud books about clouds so children can learn a little about
the types of clouds they are observing. Later, children can use books and the Internet to learn more about the clouds.

Create more green space

Creating more green space; planting seeds, then watching plants grow; and seeing the insects that the plants attract are all part of learning about the environment. Creating more green space can be as involved as landscaping a natural area with dirt pathways or as simple as planting seeds or seedlings in a window box. Do whatever your budget, space, and time allow.

With the school or program administrator’s support, let part of the playground go wild and see what grows. Talk to children about where the plants might come from and how seeds travel from place to place. When the outdoor play space includes natural elements such as logs for climbing and building, boulders for climbing and hiding, and dirt for digging, children increase both their moderate and vigorous physical activity. The increase is even more pronounced for the less physically active children (Bell & Dyment 2006). Such settings offer opportunities for fun, noncompetitive, creative, and open-ended forms of physically active play.

Tying into children’s questions and natural curiosity

Nature is a great place to let children follow their own curiosity, imagination, and interests. When a teacher pointed out an old tree stump to a group of 4- and 5-year-olds, he thought the children would find bugs and other creatures and discuss rotting wood. The children, however, pretended the tree stump was a pirate ship. Natural outdoor spaces foster creativity and allow children to learn through play and exploration.
Incorporating nature into the early childhood and primary curriculum

Children learn best when they do it in a way that excites their natural curiosity. Life is not compartmentalized into math, spelling, and science. Nature can be integrated into all the content areas.

One preschool in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area planted potatoes in large containers outdoors. At the end of the growing season, the children harvested the potatoes and made french fries.

Primary teachers can have children take clipboards outdoors to draw and write about their observations. Teachers could have children use magnifying glasses to focus on something and then write about what they see. With access to disposable or digital cameras, children can take photos to illustrate their writing. Even simpler is to create a spot outdoors with benches where children can read.

Finally, as adults become more and more informed about global warming and other environmental concerns, we educators may think children will become interested in caring for the environment if they too learn about the important reasons to conserve energy and care about nature. Although young children can take in some of this information, say, learning about recycling, recent research indicates that the best way to ensure that children become good stewards of the environment later on is to nurture in them a love and appreciation for nature when they are young (Chawla 2006). Rather than placing a burden on young children, nurture in them a love of nature. Give them time and space to explore outdoors. Help them understand cause and effect on a scale they can comprehend. This is important not only for children’s individual development but for the environment as well.

References


Chawla, L. 2006. Learning to love the natural world enough to protect it. *Barn* 2: 57–58. Norsk senter for barneforskning. (*Barn* is a quarterly published by the Norwegian Centre for Child Research at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, in Trondheim. This article was written for a special issue honoring the Norwegian child psychologist Per Olav Tiller.)