Young children need positive connections with nature in order to thrive. While our physical reliance on nature for survival has never been seriously questioned, our emotional and spiritual ties to the natural world have not been as clearly understood. Over the past few years, however, there has been a growing awareness of children’s need to interact with nature both physically and emotionally. This awareness has resulted in a great deal of activity advocating closer bonds between children and nature. Books and articles have been published on the topic (such as *The Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv); conferences have been organized (including the Working Forum on Nature Education); organizations have been started (including NACC — the Nature Action Collaborative for Children and C&NN — Children and Nature Network); environmental yards, nature playgrounds and children’s gardens are being established; and such movements as ‘Leave No Child Inside’ are gaining momentum both nationally and internationally. Even Sesame Street is producing videos and programming around the topics of learning about nature and caring for the Earth.

In response to these impressive initiatives designed to connect children with nature, some people may be asking, “What’s the ultimate purpose of all this activity? What are we really trying to accomplish? Is it about saving the environment or saving our children?” The answer is “both,” as connecting children with nature fosters the holistic development of the child while promoting love, respect, and appreciation of the natural world (Wilson, 2007). There are some indications that connecting children with nature can also contribute to the development of a more peaceful society (Wilson, 2009).

**Ecological self**

Early childhood educators have long recognized the importance of fostering the development of the whole child versus focusing only on intellectual or cognitive learning. What is now becoming increasingly clear is that the ‘ecological self’ — or ecological identity — is an integral part of the ‘whole child.’ The ecological self can be described as an individual’s connections with and attitudes toward the natural environment (Thomashow, 1995). This part of one’s self — while always present to some extent — can expand and mature over time.

While the ecological self is a part of who we are, it’s a part that often remains unaddressed in efforts to study and/or promote child development. Most early childhood educators and many parents are aware of other developmental domains: cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. They know what to look for in terms of expected developmental milestones in each of these areas and have ideas on how to foster growth in these different domains. The concept of the ecological self as an area of child development, however, has received little attention in the field of early childhood education. Current literature and efforts to connect children with nature suggest that this may be changing.

**Related concepts**

Several concepts expressed in the professional literature relating to the ecological self include biophilia and naturalistic intelligence. Biophilia is described as the “innate [human] tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Wilson, 1984, p. 1) and “the inborn attraction to the natural world” (Wilson, 2006, p. 141). The concept of biophilia includes the idea that humans depend on nature in a way that goes beyond our physical reliance on the natural world for meeting our basic needs of food, water, air, and shelter. According to the biophilia hypothesis (theory), we also depend on nature to meet our “craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction” (Kellert, 1993, p. 42).

The other concept — that of naturalistic intelligence — was first proposed by Howard Gardner (1999) as one of several forms or types of intelligence (visual,
social, verbal, etc.). According to Gardner, naturalistic intelligence includes having a strong affinity for the natural world and being able to sense patterns in and make connections to elements in nature. Gardner (1999) proposes that everyone has each form of intelligence to some degree, but that specific forms of intelligence are more prominent in individuals than other forms and that different types of intelligence can be developed through related stimulation. The concept of naturalistic intelligence has obvious overlaps with biophilia and the idea of an ecological self in that attention to children’s inborn attraction to the natural world can be used to promote the development of both the child’s ecological self and his or her naturalistic intelligence.

**Relationships and child development**

Positive relationships play a major role in child development. This is clearly evident in several of the developmental domains:

- An emotionally-healthy child has a positive relationship with self, in that he or she views self in a positive way.

- A socially-healthy child has positive relationships with others, including peers and adults in a diverse society.

- An ecologically-healthy child has a positive relationship with nature which includes understanding, appreciating, and respecting the natural world and his or her place in this world.

**Connecting children with nature**

Efforts to connect children with nature were not needed in earlier times, as children were raised in intimate contact with natural environments. They helped to raise and gather food; they spent a great deal of time playing and exploring in natural areas outdoors; and their daily lives were more in tune with the rhythms of the seasons and of night and day. Things have changed. Today, children are more likely to know the names of television and video game characters than of plants and animals in their back yards. They are more likely to shy away from spiders and bugs as things that scare them than from unhealthy foods and access to guns. Instead of a love for nature, they are developing unfounded fears of and feelings of disgust for what they might experience in nature (e.g., germs, dirt, getting wet, etc.) (Louv, 2005).

Richard Louv (2005), in *Last Child in the Woods*, introduced the idea of ‘nature-deficit disorder’ as a serious problem occurring as children lead their lives physically and psychologically separated from nature. Louv outlines obesity, attention disorders, diminished use of the senses, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses as some of the concerns linked to the absence of nature in children’s lives. Louv, in calling for a ‘nature-child reunion,’ talks about “how blessed our children can be — biologically, cognitively, and spiritually — through positive physical connection to nature” (p. 34).

**The shaping of ecological identity**

Our understanding of child development includes the concept of ‘critical’ or ‘sensitive’ periods in different developmental domains. These critical periods represent times of heightened susceptibility to acquiring understandings and skills impacting life-long attitudes, values, and competencies. An understanding of critical periods suggests that the nature of environmental experiences during early childhood can determine, in large part, the subsequent development of the ecological self (Tilbury, 1994).

Unfortunately, many of today’s children will grow up without knowing or experiencing the natural environment in a deep and direct way. This is cause for concern, as what an individual experiences during childhood has serious implications for the rest of his or her life. Even the memories of past experiences help shape our identity and the way we define ourselves over time (Chawla, 1990; Chawla & Hart, 1995; Sebba, 1991).

A number of different factors play a role in the development of a child’s ecological self: where she lives, the socioeconomic status of her family, her cultural background and ethnic group values, age, educational experiences, etc. As teachers, we can make a significant contribution to the development of a child’s ecological identity in at least one of these areas — that is, through the type of educational experiences we provide. Following are eight suggestions (based on “Fostering a Love of Nature Index,” Wilson, 1993) on how teachers can promote a positive ecological self in young children:

1. Provide frequent positive experiences in the out-of-doors with opportunities for children to explore and experiment with natural materials (sand, soil, shells, seeds, water, clay, etc.).

2. Provide a variety of observational tools and related materials (hand lens, wind socks, rain gauge, rulers, clip boards, etc.) to help children become better observers of the natural environment.

3. Use natural materials (e.g., plants, rocks, drift wood) and/or realistic representations of them (e.g., posters with pictures of wildlife) for decorations and displays in the classroom.

4. Engage children in conversations about the natural world, introducing words and ideas about natural things, using open-ended questions, and carefully listening to children’s ideas.

5. Involve children in growing plants and caring for animals.

6. Share quality nature-focused literature, including both fiction and non-fiction books, with children.

7. Encourage children to document their observations of and experiences with nature using a variety of formats (drawings, paintings, dictation, dance, drama, etc.) and expressing both scientific and aesthetic experiences with nature.

8. Share information with families about the nature and purpose of environmental education or nature education.
activities and experiences available to children at the center and in the community.

Conclusion

There are, without doubt, many reasons to reclaim nature as a part of the holistic development of children. Such development includes a healthy ecological self — and this, in turn, offers rich benefits for the child. The child with a positive ecological identity has a sense of belonging in knowing that he or she is a part of nature versus separate from it, a sense of wonder in being in touch with what is beautiful and awe-inspiring in the natural world, and a sense of security (or healing) found “in the repeated refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter” (Carson, 1956, p. 89). Children who are closely connected to nature and “who dwell . . . among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. . . . [They] find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts” (Carson, 1956, p. 88).

References


Dr. Ruth Wilson has been a teacher, teacher educator, and consultant in early childhood education for over 30 years. She currently devotes most of her time to developing curriculum in the area of environmental education for young children. Most recently, Dr. Wilson worked as a curriculum writer for California’s Education and Environment Initiative and as a consultant with Sesame Street in planning environmental programs for young children. Dr. Wilson has published several books and numerous articles. Her most recent book is Nature and Young Children: Encouraging Creative Play and Learning in Natural Environments (Routledge, 2008). Dr. Wilson can be contacted at wilson.rutha@gmail.com.
Taking action to connect two million children with nature

by Nancy Rosenow

“When we are dreaming alone, it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is the beginning of reality.”
– Dom Helder Camara

Seventy teams of people from around the world – all eager to develop concrete plans for ways to connect more children and families with the joys of the natural world – met together in October, 2010, to share ideas, wrestle with common issues, and dream together. Delegates from more than 50 countries spent three productive and inspiring days together at Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska, USA, for the “Connecting the World’s Children with Nature Action Forum,” sponsored by the World Forum Foundation’s Nature Action Collaborative for Children Leadership Team. Earlier that year, World Forum Foundation Co-Founder, Roger Neugebauer, made a pledge during a meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative that the Action Forum would result in connecting two million children with nature. Forum delegates eagerly embraced that challenge. Delegates were inspired as teams from Afghanistan and Haiti described ways that children’s connections with the natural world could help them heal from the devastating effects of war and from natural disasters. And, as all delegates explored the outdoors together, made music, and ate foods fresh from the farm, a renewed sense of community was strengthened. Many delegates commented that when children (and adults) are reminded that all people on earth share a connection with the wonders of the natural world, we are really forging bonds of peace and understanding.

Exciting and concrete plans have been developed by all 70 teams and work is now underway to make those plans reality. Already reports are trickling in of actions beginning to take place. A nature education conference was held in India: a multi-disciplinary group of early childhood and environmental educators from the United States are getting ready to teach a collaborative college course using the online Environmental Action Kit (debuted at the Forum) as core curriculum; Community Forums to discuss ways to bring nature connections to towns and cities are being scheduled throughout the world. And, so much more is to come.

So many people wrote of how their experiences at the Forum inspired them to re-new their commitments to this work that it would be impossible to include words from everyone. Following are a couple of excerpts from two of the first teams to send comments after the Forum:

From Marsha Swanson, United States:
“The enthusiasm and energy shared by the participants is so stimlating! Our team worked in the car for a couple hours on the way home refining our conference action plan to include more than just the conference. We have since presented the plan and a Powerpoint, including photos of the Forum, as well as the DVD of the “Universal Principles for Connecting the World’s Children to Nature” to our area’s Nature Connections Team. We are expanding our initial ideas for our 4th Annual “Outdoors: Let’s Explore Conference” to include much of what we learned at the Forum. In addition, some of us met today to review the design for a Nature Explore Classroom on the grounds of our county nature center and begin the next stage of development.”

From Margaret Wachu Gichubi, Kenya:
“For me, the drive to Arbor Day Farm was full of wonder . . . the rivers meandering, oxbow lakes and wetlands, which made me connect very well with nature. In one of the activities outside, a red fox scampered to safety when it heard us make some noise. That to me was a great experience to have happened during the day. The highlight was dinner at the Barn . . . with the very exciting drums, the moonlight, all under the blue sky.

“The interaction with the Forum participants was an eye opener, which gave first hand experience of how Early Childhood is being integrated with nature in other parts of the world. This was a memorable experience which shows that learning outdoors should be incorporated in all Early Childhood programs.”

A new resource, developed for the Action Forum, is now available to everyone, everywhere. An “Environmental Action Kit” — which includes a wealth of downloadable activities, research briefs, PowerPoints, and DVDs — is accessible free of charge at worldforumfoundation.org/nature. Groups all over the world are encouraged to become part of the effort to help connect two million children — and counting — with the sustaining and enriching power that nature can bring to all of our lives.

Natural Phenomenon

November 25-27, 2011
Wild Woods • Whangarei, New Zealand

To read Memory Loader’s in-depth account of this year’s conference, please visit the NACC website: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature