



Investing in School Readiness

Ready!

NEWS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Children Need Positive Interactions With Nature

In much of human history, children spent a great deal of time connecting with nature on a regular basis. A generation or two ago, during these “free-range” childhoods, children spent hours of unstructured time outdoors, climbing trees, exploring nearby woods or grassy lots, making mud pies, collecting pine cones and rocks, chasing frogs and capturing fireflies. As a result, they developed a deep emotional connection with the natural world which led them to care about the environment as adults, in some instances becoming conservation professionals; foresters, wildlife biologists, naturalists and arborists. Many became parents and citizens who support environmental causes through their personal actions, contributions and votes.

Gradually, children’s access to the natural world has been shrinking, with alarming results. Societal factors have profoundly changed the way today’s children experience the natural world. Researchers report the resulting rise of what they refer to as biophobia or ecophobia, a fear of the natural world and environmental issues. David Sobel, in his article “Beyond Ecophobia,” explains that children are exposed to frightening environmental issues, without first being given the opportunity to develop close personal connections with nature. “If we want

children to flourish,”
Sobel says, “to
become
truly

empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.”

As families and educators read about the importance of children’s contact with nature they often do not know how to respond. The first step may be to simply acknowledge the fact that the world has changed. For many children, chances to explore freely in nature do not “just happen” anymore. Adults need to think carefully about strategies that ensure nature-child connections can be made every day. Providing intentional experiences that give children the opportunity to better understand and appreciate the natural world, will help children engage in a sense of wonder and thrive in holistic ways.

[Continued on page 2](#)



Children Need Positive Interactions With Nature

continued from cover

In the publication, "Keeping it Growing," environmental educator Ruth Wilson shares, "For children to thrive and reach their full potential, they need environments that appropriately match who they are in body, mind, emotions, and spirit. In addition to being safe and intellectually stimulating, environments for young children should also foster a sense of wonder, help children experience their connections with all living things, and honor their intuitive way of knowing the world. Natural environments with their rich, enchanting, ever-

changing, and existing attributes have all the elements of what is needed to foster wonder in young children and support the soul-making process."

Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation have joined with other environmental groups, educators, landscape architects and community planners to develop a network of certified Nature Explore classrooms throughout the United States. These outdoor spaces are based on field-tested guiding principles for incorporating natural elements into thoughtfully designed outdoor classrooms. With guidance from trained educators and supportive parents exposure to these environments results in active, engaged children who develop dynamic relationships with nature.

Dimensions research shows that experiences in these spaces allow children to communicate the sophistication of what they know about their world.

Experiential learning gives them opportunities to "feel" more connected to nature and to process their emotions. Often, through experience and teacher support, children learn to take risks, develop self-confidence and gain mastery over their fears. Children also develop important relational life skills. Caring for plants and creatures provides practice in nurturing behaviors that helps them interact in kind and gentle ways with people too. Children enthusiastically explore, create, learn and play in these nature-rich spaces. They are developing a joyful foundation for life and a nature-inspired sense of wonder that will last into adulthood.

Original article by Nature Explore, reproduced in abridged form with permission. Nature Explore was a presenter at the 2013 Fairfax Futures Symposium: Naturally Inspired! Connecting Children to Nature. Their engaging, inspiring, research-based workshops support comprehensive learning with nature and support adults who work with children in schools, early childhood and environmental education programs

References:

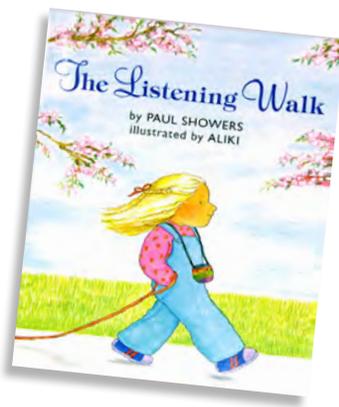
- Dimensions. (2005). Helping Children Learn to Love the Earth Before We Ask Them to Save It: Developmentally Appropriate Environmental Education for Young Children. Dimensions Educational Research Foundation. (available upon request)
- Kiewra, C., Reeble, T., & Rosenow, N. (2012). Keeping it growing: Sustaining your outdoor classroom. Lincoln, NE: Dimensions Educational Research Foundation.
- Miller, D. (2007). The seeds of learning: Young children develop important skills through their gardening experiences at a midwestern early education program. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 6 (2): 49-66.
- Rosenow, N. (2011). Learning to Love the Earth and each other. *Spotlight on Young Children and Nature*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. Originally published in *Young Children*, 63 (1): 10-13.
- Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart of Nature Education*. Great Barrington, MN: The Orion Society.



Naturally Inspired Book Selection

The Listening Walk

by Paul Showers (Author), Aliko (Illustrator) 1993. HarperCollins
Ages 4 - 8 years



The Listening Walk by Paul Showers, illustrated by Aliko, is the story of a child listening for the variety of sounds to be found during a neighborhood walk. Aliko offers bright, simple illustrations that lend themselves to this listening concept book. Some illustrations extend the story by showing images of sounds not mentioned in the text, such as cats yowling and children playing in the rain. This encourages children to actively imagine the sounds depicted. Showers uses onomatopoeia to great effect, encouraging participation from children during read-alouds. The opportunities for learning experiences to explore with this book are infinite.

Here are three quick examples to try:

1. Create a game that requires children to close their eyes and listen as things are pulled from a box during story time. Then have them guess what those things are.
2. Take the children in your care on an adventure outside to see and hear different things within the children's environment. Once back inside discuss those sounds to reinforce their comprehension and listening skills.
3. Have children create items, such as shakers that include sounds of their choice. As a group they can share and explain their projects to peers and later take them home to their families.

Other Books that Explore Nature

- ❖ **Owl Moon.** J. Yolen. Illus. J. Schoenherr. 1987. Philomel. Infancy through preschool.
- ❖ **Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer.** S. Hood. 2003. Reader's Digest Children's Publishing. Infancy through preschool.
- ❖ **Tails.** M. Van Fleet. 2003. Red Wagon Books. Infancy through preschool.
- ❖ **Eric Carle's ABC.** E. Carle. The World of Eric Carle series. 2007. Grosset & Dunlap. Ages 3 and up.
- ❖ **Feathers for Lunch.** L. Ehlert. 1996. Voyager Books. Ages 3-8.
- ❖ **Butterfly Colors.** H. Frost. 2000. Capstone Press. Ages 4-8.
- ❖ **In the Small, Small Pond.** D. Fleming. 1998. Henry Holt. Ages 4-8.
- ❖ **Urban Roosts: Where Birds Nest in the City.** B. Bash. 1992. Little, Brown. Ages 4-8.

Fairfax Futures Board of Directors

Theodore Austell III
Boeing

Joan Isenberg
Professor Emerita, George Mason University

Mary Anne Lecos
Education Consultant

Amy Mackay
Wells Fargo

Matthew Sawyer
PNC Bank

Anne-Marie Twohie
Fairfax County Office for Children

Dalissa Vargas (ex-officio)
Executive Director, Fairfax Futures



Exploring The Outdoors With A Young Child

When children explore the natural world, tapping into their innate sense of discovery offers limitless possibilities. Building a game or purpose around engaging nature is a wonderful way to develop a child's affinity for the outdoors, build confidence, and develop reasoning and literacy skills. Here are five easy outdoor activities that will seem new every time you do them:

1. Go for a nature scavenger hunt.

Build the hunt around a list of characteristics such as colors, texture and size that offer great flexibility and creativity in what children might find. Instruct them to look for:

- A specific color.
- Something dry, wet or shiny.
- Something round or flat.
- Something that moves.
- Or make up your own ideas!

Individually or in teams, children will thrive in an activity that permits them to search and explore. Depending on the day, location or children's ages a scavenger hunt can be simplified or made more challenging to stimulate their interest.

2. Create observation journals.

Have children examine items and draw what they see. For example, find flowers of diverse colors or a variety of leaves and talk about their shapes, textures and different parts. Children can imagine they are scientists, observing and documenting all they see, touch and smell.

3. Find nature in unexpected places.

Look for places to explore near where you live. Note grass and weeds in the cracks of a sidewalk, spider webs under the stairs or worms in puddles after a rainstorm. Don't worry if you don't live near an open field, forest or lake. Show children how nature truly is everywhere by identifying it in their own daily lives.

Discuss collecting with the children in your care. Talking about where and when it is OK to collect leaves, branches and tiny creatures is an important element to exploration and caring for nature. If the ground is carpeted with acorns or flowers, it's probably okay to take one. Examine something for a few hours and then let it go again. For instance keep fireflies in a jar and release them a few hours later.



What's In Your Backyard: Local Resources for Early Childhood Professionals

Here in Northern Virginia we are fortunate to have an abundance of resources and access to public parks and playgrounds throughout Fairfax County and beyond. Most of these resources are free to the public and can offer a wonderful opportunity to expose children to different environments they wouldn't normally encounter. Here are a few resources to get you started:

Fairfax County Park Authority

Fairfax County's public park system includes six nature centers embedded in a system containing more than 400 parks, and more

than 200 miles of trails to explore.

Nature Centers at Hidden Pond and Hidden Oaks

Both offer acres of undisturbed woodland, quiet trails, splashing streams and tranquil ponds for natural exploration of all kinds. The nature center, which is accessible to everyone, features exhibits and live displays which orient you to the park and the natural world of Fairfax County.

Huntley Meadows Park

One of the most productive non-tidal wetlands in the mid-Atlantic offers one

of the best places for bird watching in Northern Virginia.

National Audubon Society

News and information about local nature programs, naturalist activities and more.

Children's Environmental Literacy Foundation

Information on environmental sustainability that includes resources and activities for children on how to make their classrooms "green."