



Exploring Nature with Children

The building blocks for developing responsible citizens are laid in the early years. The sooner children participate in activities with an environmental theme, the more likely they will develop a strong appreciation of the environment.

Interdisciplinary Approach

Exploration of the natural world should be ongoing, rather than just a theme for one week of the year. Environmental education should permeate all aspects of the child care program. For example, in the art area, a box can be set up for paper that has not been completely utilized. This paper can be used for craft projects or by children who would like to practise cutting.



Observation

Nature can be appreciated wherever you are — from an urban backyard to a rural meadow. Observe the natural world around you and draw the children’s attention to the wonders of the environment. Appreciate a wildflower’s struggle to grow through the cracks in a sidewalk. Show children the differences between various wildflowers, smell them and take pictures. Explain that wildflowers must be allowed to go to seed so that more can grow next year; if the flower is picked it is unable to continue through its life cycle. Watch the animals and insects wake up. Observe a bird’s nest under construction. Materials such as yarn, small feathers and animal hair can be placed nearby in hopes that a bird will use your offering.

Language

All plants have a name and are only classified as a weed if they are not in their natural habitat. Learn the names of the plants, wildflowers and birds that live in your neighborhood and share the information with the children. Observe the life cycle of plants and animals. Dandelions are good examples as they progress to the seed stage fairly quickly. Explain to the children what they are observing, thereby enriching their vocabulary.

Respect

Is stomping on insects learned or innate behaviour? With knowledge, respect develops. If children are given the opportunity to observe ants and appreciate them for the hard workers they are, they will begin to understand their role in our ecosystem. Discuss hurtful insects such as wasps. Encourage children to avoid or calmly move away from these insects.

Explain that everything in the natural world has a purpose and that we must respect their roles. Pick objects off the ground or salvage an abandoned bird nest for use in science table or art activities. Remember to use only what nature no longer needs.

Role Model

Your own sense of wonder, more than your scientific knowledge, will inspire and sustain a child’s love of nature.

Your sense of awe will be contagious to the children. Explore and learn together. Focus on “experiencing” rather than “teaching.” Take your lead from the children after you have provided the opportunity for them to interact with the natural world.¹

Ways to Naturalize Your Outdoor Play Space

- Plant wildflowers that are native to your area. Wildflowers attract butterflies to their nectar.
- Create a natural area containing a rock pile and logs. Have toys available so that the children can use their imaginations as they play in this natural setting.
- Plant a vegetable or flower garden. Get the children involved in all areas of this project.
- Get involved in composting. Compost provides rich mulch to spread on the lawn, flower beds and garden.
- Keep bird feeders full year-round. Also fill hummingbird or oriole feeders in the summer.

Reference

1. Dr. Ruth Wilson (April 1997). *What Can I Teach My Young Child About the Environment?* from the Internet (<http://mirror.eschina.bnu.edu.cn/Mirror1/accesseric/www.eric.ed.gov/archives/environ.html>).

Resource Books

Wilson, Dr. Ruth (1993). *Fostering a Sense of Wonder During the Early Childhood Years*, Ohio: Greyden Press.
Wilson, Dr. Ruth (1994). *Environmental Education at the Early Childhood Level*. Ohio: NAAEE.

Children’s Books to Share

Compost: Growing Gardens From Your Garbage by Linda Glaser
From Tree to Paper by The Learning Source
The Kids Canadian Tree Book by Pamela Hickman
Nature in the Home by David Suzuki
A Tree in a Forest by Jan Thornhill
The Garden in Our Yard by Greg Henry Quinn
If We Could See the Air by David Suzuki
What’s Alive? by Kathleen Weidner Zoehfeld
I’m A Seed by Jean Marzollo