



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

Experiencing Nature: An Opportunity for Pedagogic Quality

by Bowine Wijffels, Cailin Partners and Marc Veekamp, Veldwerk Nederland

A natural do-and-discover garden at a child daycare centre, an after-school forest group, raincoats always at hand . . . more and more child care centres in the Netherlands are beginning to see the value of nature in child care. Experiencing nature appears to contribute positively to the development of the young child. The organisations Veldwerk Nederland, ROC Koning Willem 1 College, ROC Landstede, Buitenkans Participatieve Groenprojecten, and Cailin Partners carried out research about the present stage of developments in the Netherlands and abroad: what the possibilities are for child care centres in the Netherlands and what obstacles exist for a further development of nature experience in child care.

For the introduction of successfully experiencing nature programmes in the child care centres, four elements appear to be crucial:

- Competence of the pedagogic staff members;
- Inclusion of the principles of experiencing nature in the policies of the child care centre;
- Involvement and agreement of the parents; and
- Presence of a suitable outdoor facility, because experiencing nature can, of course, only be experienced outdoors.

Only if these four conditions can be realised do we have a reasonable chance that experiencing nature can really occupy a place in the child care centre.

In this article we will tell you more about the experiences of the project partners

and about the design of nature experiencing for children's day care centres and the role you can play in these developments.

The Importance of Experiencing Nature

Experiencing nature challenges children to become more independent by discovering and communicating. Nature also provides relaxation and rest. Research shows that children (and especially very young children) who spend a great deal of time in nature, concentrate better, are less stressed, and are ill less frequently.

Experiencing nature also contributes to the following specific areas of development:

- Locomotor system
- Use of the senses
- Good emotional development (perseverance, self-confidence, etc.)
- Moral development: respect for the environment, plants, and animals.

In short, experiencing nature is indispensable for children's balanced development, and therefore also essential in child care. It is, of course, not by accident that nature and the physical environment occupy an important place in the pedagogic framework of child care centres designed for toddlers 0-4 years. But how does one give form to experiencing nature? Are there no risks associated with the process? As far as the children are concerned, there are no obstacles. Children have a natural need to play and be outside.

Opportunities or Risks?

The ideal starting point for experiencing nature outside in the fresh air might

include the following elements:

- A discovery garden
- A piece of grass for the babies
- A bamboo thicket where the toddlers can go on an adventure journey
- A piece of ground where the after-school group can climb trees and, together with the pedagogic members of staff, build huts.

But is it sensible to let toddlers climb tree trunks with the risk that they might fall off? Should we let ten-year-olds independently put out an adventure track in a wood? Yes, because what we fear is actually the opposite of what turns out to be true. Experiencing nature, provided it is well-guided, prevents accidents. Children learn at a young age to handle risks and practice motor skills. Of course the area has to be suitable to practice in relative safety.

And what about parents' concerns: Are parents willing to see their children come home in grubby clothes? Or that they prick their fingers on the bramble bushes? No, of course not every time. It is therefore recommended to discuss the dilemmas of experience with nature thoroughly with parents. A daycare centre can obtain special playsuits for outdoor activities and parents can give their children a set of 'outdoor clothing.' Once parents are convinced of the importance of experiencing nature, then the problems listed above do not hamper play. By including experiencing nature in the centre's pedagogic policies, parents know what to expect and will be briefed thoroughly about them.

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The Role of Training

In vocational education, there is generally minimal attention — or none at all — paid to children experiencing nature. And graduated pedagogic staff members are not 'automatically' competent in guiding children in experiencing nature. Their attitude towards experiencing nature is more important than, for example, the presence of suitable materials. A positive attitude of the pedagogic staff member stimulates the children to go and explore instead of finding the creepy-crawlies 'scary.' In addition, the pedagogic staff member follows the children's interests in nature as much as possible and offers them new supplementary challenges. A good practice of experiencing nature demands extra attention during the education or refresher courses or extra training. The vocational schools (ROCs) involved in the project have introduced a module of "Child and Nature." But other ROCs are now including the subject in their curriculum. Special nature training and coaching courses for the practical application of nature training have been developed.

What Is a Suitable Outside Location?

Not all centres have a large outside area at their disposal, but it has been found that even in smaller gardens much can be achieved. The ideal outside facility is especially a nature-rich do-and-discover garden where they are allowed to play and experience. In these spaces:

- There exist variation in measurements, space/mass, relief, plants, and ambiance.
- The senses of the children are being stimulated in a variety of ways.
- Nature and natural processes are given

space; for example, children encounter falling leaves, mushrooms, and rotting wood.

- There is a clearly recognizable space for babies (0-5 years).
- There is a covered area where children can play, eat, drink, and be active throughout all seasons. The pedagogic workers are thereby enabled to spend longer periods outside. For them, there are places to sit to feed the babies and change their nappies.
- Because of the games of the children, the garden will change continuously. That seems to be a pity, but in a children's garden children should be playing and discovering. A good design is worth its weight in gold, so go and search for a garden architect with an eye for this target group.

Support from the 'Green' Professionals

Child care centres have a lot of support from "green" professionals when shaping their nature experience venture. Firstly, the outside area of the garden has to be established. That requires the knowledge of a landscape architect, such as knowledge of plants and other materials and a good arrangement of the space. Next, it is important that pedagogic staff members are not afraid to undertake and get a grip on the potential of the physical environment. Support of child care centres by organisations for nature and environmental education with training and advice, materials, knowledge, and practical examples helps to lower the threshold.

Not every child care centre has the funds for design and construction of the garden. It has been shown that councils will sometimes be prepared to assist. Staff members of local nature organisations can help in finding the right funding sources.

Practice Experiences

It is possible to set up such centres, as has been shown in practice. There are examples of this in the Netherlands and abroad. But these efforts demand contributions from both trainers, designers, child care centres, nature educators, and policymakers. The knowledge and

expertise is there, but where does one find the right people?

The initiators of the project "Groen is Gras" are willing to help you bring these worlds together. They have already done this in practice by establishing nature experiencing in two model locations: training and coaching fellow workers, parent evenings, natural outdoor locations, inclusion of nature experiencing in policies and teaching schedules, and by producing a DVD with information about the projects. But now the time has arrived for a country-wide effort.

Conference "Kind van nature 2009"

On September 11, 2009 the first conference "Kind van nature" (Child of Nature) was held in the town of Zwolle in the Netherlands. The day was designed for all professionals who are devoting themselves to the young and nature: landscape architects, pedagogues, and nature educators. All participants received the new DVD "Experiencing Nature in Children's Daycare Centres" free of charge. The DVD is a summary of the project results and can be used to inspire pedagogues, parents, staff, designers, and policymakers. The DVD is subtitled in English and can be ordered for €30,-ex delivery charges.

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WORLD FORUM FOUNDATION

The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

There's Nature in Our Nature!

by Swati Popat

Our bodies are made of the five 'tatvas' (5 elements of nature) namely: Jal (*water*), Agni (*fire*), Prithvi (*earth*), Vayu (*air*), Akash (*sky*). These same five elements are also found in nature which means we are made of nature! Inherently our bodies seek nature, want to be close to it, want to benefit from it and nurture it. However, changing lifestyles have taken us away from nature, and this is the angst that our body is going through.

Also, adults have become too protective of children, telling them: "Don't play in the sun"; "Don't touch that tree"; "Don't play in the grass, you will get dirty"; or, "Go and play, but please don't come with dirty clothes."

When I read Richard Louv's *Last Child In The Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2008), the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder' resonated with me because I find it to be true for today's children. This disconnect from nature is unknowingly contributing to hypertension, hyperactivity, and attention problems. We need the calming, cooling connection with nature.

As a leader for Asia for the Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC), I have created a link between nature elements and how these can be developed in children by educators and parents. Let's keep children in tune with nature, then we will not have to teach them to protect nature. They will belong to nature, and you automatically protect something that belongs to you. Let's give the world back to children. Let's give them all five: Jal, Vayu, Akash, Prithvi, Agni.

Agni (or fire): *What can this element cultivate in a child?*

- Fire can give warmth.
- Fire can destroy.
- Some people lack the 'fire' or the 'drive.'
- This is the zest, the will, the spirit, and the force, which we must cultivate in children to make them achievers.
- Too much fire can be destructive.

How do we give the gift of Agni or fire to a child? Simply let him play in the sun every day. Stop worrying so much about sunburn or tans. Remember caps and shady trees. We are not talking about activities in the scorching sun. We want to ensure that children have ample time to play in the sun. This is good for their overall health.

Akash (or sky): *What can this element cultivate in the personality of your child?*

- The sky houses the wonders like moon, sun, star, and planets.
- The sky can show you a rainbow.
- It can scare you with dark clouds and lightning.
- Cultivate in children the ability to be able to have a balance in their personality traits.
- Teach them to be able to cultivate many values like a rainbow and to reach and touch limitless horizons like the sky.

How do we give the gift of Akash to a child?

Open-air activities any time of the day are better than air-conditioned rooms and activities. Go to the park or the beach rather than the mall and the freedom of the sky will rejuvenate the child.

Jal (or water): *What can this element cultivate in the personality of your child?*

- Water is 'shital'; water is 'shant.'
- Water is essential, it can dissolve almost anything.
- Water can flow, drip, and drizzle.
- Water can drown; water can become a tsunami or a flood!
- Let's cultivate in children the ability to absorb from the environment and yet remain 'shital.'



- Let us teach them the value of completely dissolving, cleansing all negative influences from their environment.

How do we give the gift of jal to a child?

- Help children to hear different water sounds and watch their skills in auditory discrimination improve.
- Help her create music with water and see her musical intelligence blossom.
- Allow him to play with water and see his attention and patience improve.

Need we say more?

Vayu (or air): *What can this element cultivate in the personality of a child?*

- Air is everywhere.
- Everyone needs air.
- No one can see air.
- Air can soothe or air can become a storm and destroy.
- Independence is like air.
- Independence can give them the ability to explore.
- Too much independence can become a storm that destroys everything in its path.

How do we give the gift of Vayu? Give children opportunities to feel the grass, play with sand, splash in water, and hug a tree. These sensorial experiences help children become more grounded and confident. Let them feel the wind with activities like football at the beach or kite flying.

Prithvi (or earth): *What can this element cultivate in a child?*

- The earth has a balance of great resources.
- The earth cannot fight back when its resources are misused.
- Let a child be a powerhouse of resources, skills, and talents just like Prithvi.
- Give them the ability to speak out against discrimination and exploitation.
- Until children are able to do this on their own, let's all fight for children's rights.

How do we give the gift of Prithvi? You can become a member of the NACC (see resources). NACC is a worldwide organi-

sation that is striving to connect young children with their world — the world of nature!

Let's cultivate nature in children today. If our children have early experiences with nature that are pleasant, happy, and enjoyable, then they will grow up respecting, protecting, and loving the very environment that gave them those pleasant experiences. Let's give the world back to our children!

References

Louv, R. (2008). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. New York: Algonquin Books.



WORLD FORUM FOUNDATION

Connecting Children with Nature Action Forum

October 17-20, 2010

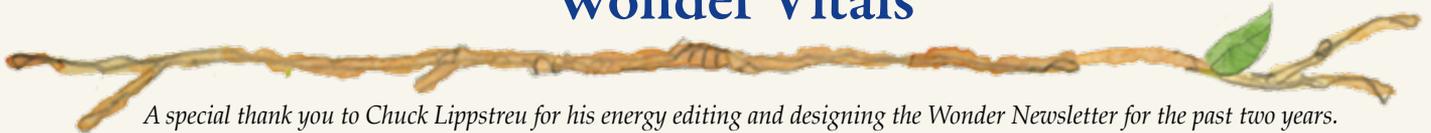
Arbor Day Farm • Nebraska City, Nebraska

We are inviting 70 multi-disciplinary Nature Action Teams from around the world to come together to learn strategies and secure tools for launching campaigns to connect children with nature.

Attendance will be by application only. Interested teams can apply for consideration on the Nature Action Collaborative for Children web site:

www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature

Wonder Vitals



*A special thank you to Chuck Lippstreu for his energy editing and designing the Wonder Newsletter for the past two years.
Thank you for your wonderful work, Chuck!*

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

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