

The Power of Nature to Help Children Heal

by Vicki Bohling-Philippi

“There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrain of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.”

Rachel Carson, *A Sense of Wonder*

These words, written more than 40 years ago by well-known author and naturalist Rachel Carson in her book, *A Sense of Wonder*, continue to be important today — maybe even more so than when they were first written — because our classrooms and homes are often filled with children who are hurting in one way or another and need the healing influence that a close, personal connection with nature can provide.

First, a word about some of the sadness in children’s lives today:

At a recent early education conference in the Midwest, a Head Start teacher confided that out of 18 children in her class, two-thirds of them have already experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse in their young lives.

Young children are being exposed to violence on television and in video games in a way that no other generation before them has ever experienced. With our “real time” coverage of wars and natural disasters, children see disturbing images in their living rooms practically as they are occurring, leading to a sense that the world is a continually dangerous place.

Research by R. A. Wilson (1994) and D. A. Simmons (1994) (based on personal interviews with groups of children varying in age from preschool to age nine) found that the attitudes children expressed towards various aspects of the natural environment (rain, wildflowers, trees, birds) included more expressions of fear and dislike than appreciation, caring, or enjoyment. Researchers S. Cohen and D. Horn-Wingard (1993) contend that children’s unfounded

fears and misconceptions about the natural environment develop when they have very little actual contact with living things and obtain most of their attitudes through the electronic media.

In *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2005), Richard Louv suggests that the “criminalization of natural play” and fear of litigation have reduced the number of play spaces in nature where children are allowed to explore and exercise freely. Childhood depression and attention deficit diagnoses have increased dramatically in recent years. Louv (2005) makes a strong case that these disorders may be related to the rapid pace of our electronic culture when it is not balanced with the slower rhythm of the natural world.

How can children’s connection with nature help heal some of these problems? A variety of positive strategies exist, but each begins with the attentive support and encouragement of caregivers, teachers, and parents. Here are some of the things caring adults can do:

■ Help children develop a sense of seasons

As Rachel Carson notes above, nature teaches us that sad times do not last forever, and that just as seasons change, so do the experiences in our lives. Children who have regular contact with nature learn about changing seasons. They watch as plants go through natural life cycles. They experience growth as well as decay. When children have infrequent or irregular contact with nature, however, they have less chance to personally experience the reassurance of watching a new young bud appear on a branch that had seemed to be dead over the winter. Providing a chance to explore nature daily is a gift we can try to give the children in our lives. “Adopting” a tree to watch closely over time is a great way of helping children learn about the natural cycles of life.

Vicki Bohling-Philippi, M.Ed., has been a Licensed Parent and Family Educator with

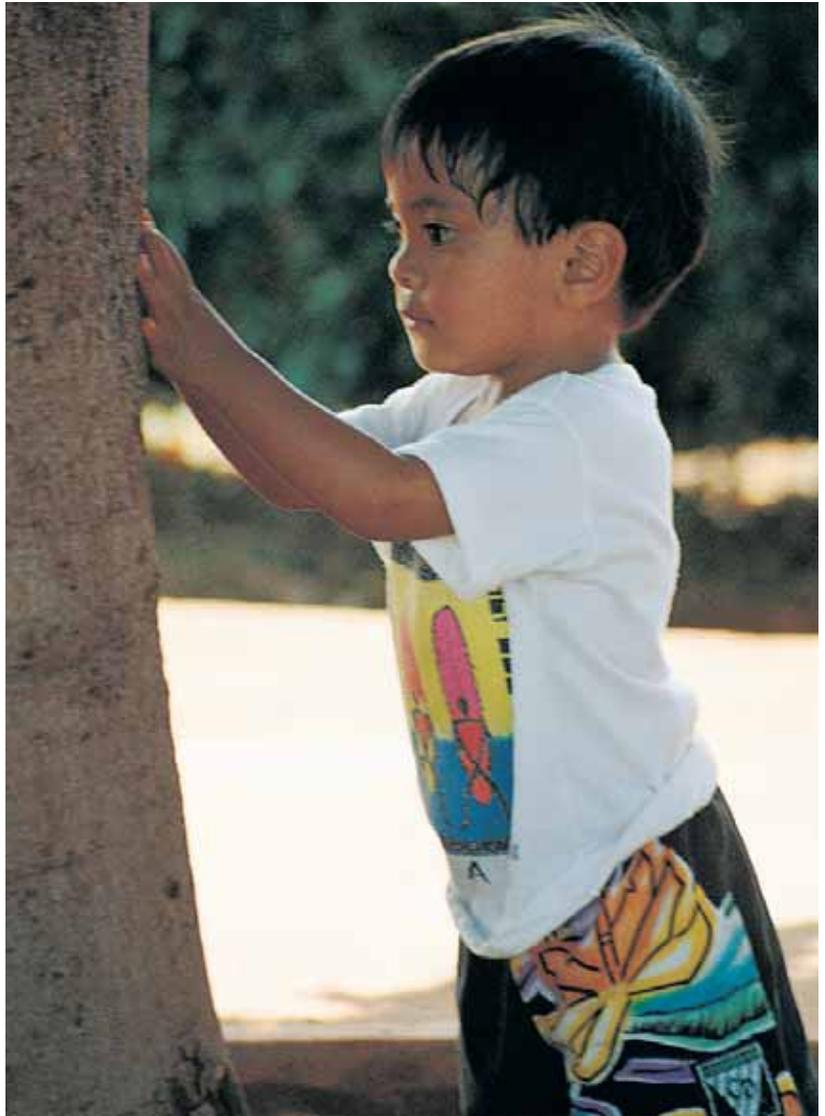


Minnesota’s Early Childhood Family Education program for the past ten years. She co-authored “Getting Ready for Kindergarten” for *Family Information Services (FIS)* in 2002, and with the same team has developed a series of parent education assessment tools for use in early childhood family education programs. She is a consultant and trainer for the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and has spoken to many parent and educator groups as a certified True Colors trainer. She lives in Wyoming, Minnesota, with her husband, son, and daughter. Vicki can be reached at vbohlingphilippi@forest-lake.k12.mn.us.

■ Help children develop a sense of themselves as nurturers

Helping a child who is angry or hurting focus some of that negative energy on positive activities like caring for flowers, trees, or worms can be a truly restorative experience. A few techniques to try include:

- Designate children as “tree doctors” with responsibilities for monitoring mulch, moisture, and bark health. This can help them feel a sense of responsibility for the world around them.
- Creating a “worm bin” from a large aluminum tank is another way children can turn potential reluctance into an appreciation for the work done by the tiniest of creatures. Fill the worm bin with dirt and worms and put either indoors or outdoors, depending on the season and climate. Give children a chance to look gently through the dirt and carefully hold worms to “check on them.” It is amazing how children who have recently been engaged in angry “lashing out” behaviors can calm down and refocus when they go to the worm bin. If adults call attention to children’s nurturing behavior, children learn to see themselves as nurturers. For some children, this new definition of self as nurturer is crucial in helping them cope with difficult situations in their lives.
- Simple children’s gardens help children develop skill and knowledge as they participate in every process from planting to harvesting. They come to understand that the food they eat and the flowers they enjoy are a result of care and diligence. Children’s gardens can be planted indoors or out, in containers or in the ground. The size of the project is not as important as the time invested in watching the garden unfold.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

One of the great gifts we can give children through their frequent interactions with nature is a sense that they are connected to something larger than themselves.

- Some children are fascinated by bugs; for others they are a source of fear and confusion. By helping children with the “catch and release” of safe insects, adults can foster ease and understanding. For a fun literacy connection, caregivers can read *Hey, Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose, in which a child and ant discuss the moral dilemma of whether or not to step on the ant from both points of view.

■ Help children develop a sense of connection to something timeless and larger than themselves

One of the great gifts we can give children through their frequent interactions with nature is a sense that they are connected to something larger than themselves. Nature is a constant in human life throughout history and geography.

The same songbirds children see in the spring will winter somewhere else around the globe. Helping children find those connections, perhaps by looking at pictures of the places “our” birds go in the winter, is a great way to help them realize how interconnected life on our planet really is.

Many children have developed a fear of storms, wind, and rain, often stemming from a handful of tragic weather events that get presented over and over in the media. By allowing children to play in the rain when it is not storming and teaching them to count the seconds between thunder and lightening when it is, we model connection and wonder over fear and anxiety. *Thunder Cake* by Patricia Polacco, in which a grandmother finds a clever way to help alleviate her granddaughter’s fear of thunderstorms, reinforces that relationships with caring adults help children put their fears into perspective.

Exploring the marvels that occur outdoors at night can also help children connect to something larger than themselves. Flashlights covered with red cellophane protect the eyes of animals at night, yet allow adults and children to explore the sights and sounds of nighttime nature in a new and fascinating way.

Involving children in the compost of organic material at home and at school allows them to directly observe the cyclical nature of life. Though other recycling projects have great merit, it is sometimes difficult for young children to understand pieces of the process they cannot physically see. Interacting with nature provides concrete, hand-on experiences for young learners who may not yet be able to grasp abstractions.

Developmental psychologist Martha Ferrell Erickson, a leading authority in parent-child attachment, recently spoke of a child’s innate attachment to nature as an additional key to health and well-being throughout childhood. This natural connection is often evident when a fussy baby is taken outside and quickly calms to this literal change of scenery. But just as early bonding establishes the foundation of trust between parent and child, the earlier a child develops a “bond” with the natural world, the more likely that child will feel trust and comfort in nature versus fear and dread.

Children learn much better through three-dimensional play and experiences than through flashcards, worksheets, and screens; and some of the best three-dimensional learning opportunities are literally right outside our back doors. But for the many children among us who are fearful, hurting, or inexperienced with nature, telling them to “just go out and play” is neither helpful nor effective. Young children need caring adults to support and sustain their entrance into the natural world — adults who will walk with them, encourage them, explore, and wonder with them. Children need adults who understand that interacting with nature reduces stress, increases attention span, and fosters brain development.

Imagine the child who has just been introduced to his first puzzle. The supporting adult shows the child how to remove a piece, size up the shape and detail in the piece, and very carefully turn the piece until it pops into place. The adult knows that once the child masters the technique, he will not always need shoulder-to-shoulder assistance; but without that initial guidance, the child would not develop the skill or confidence to become proficient in the end.

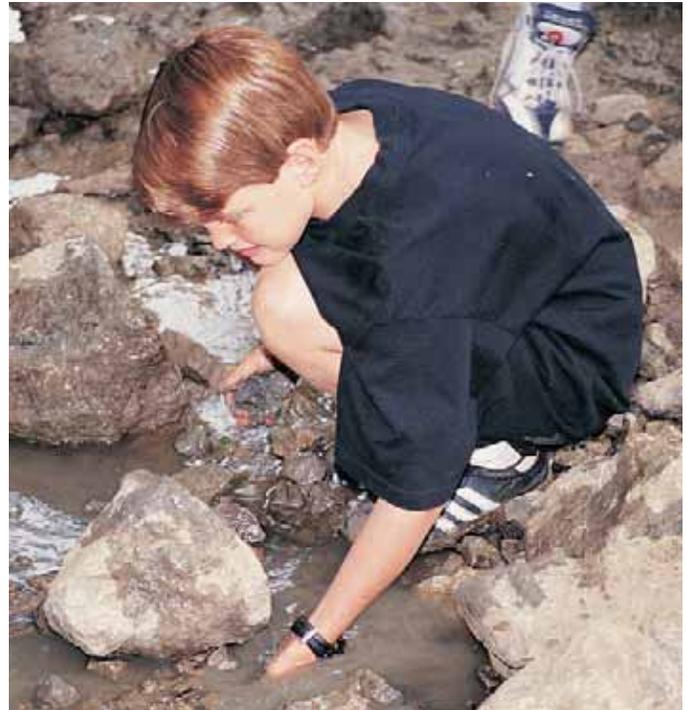
Children need adults who understand that interacting with nature reduces stress, increases attention span, and fosters brain development.



And so it goes with nature . . . children affected by hurt, anxiety, or sadness *can* find healing and hope in the “repeated refrain of nature”; but parents, teachers, and caregivers must be a part of the picture when children are young. With this early support, a child will grow up solidly connected to the natural world, ready to return the favor to future generations.

References

- Carson, R. (1965). *A Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCrest.
- Cohen, S., & Horm-Wingerd, D. (1993). “Children and the environment: Ecological awareness among preschool children.” *Environment and Behavior*, 25 (1), 103-120.
- Erickson, M. F., Ph.D., Director of the Harris Programs at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Early Education and Development. Co-chair of the President’s Initiative on Children, Youth & Families.
- Hoose, P., & Hoose, H. (1998). *Hey, Little Ant*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.



Polacco, P. (1997). *Thunder Cake*. San Diego: Putnam.

Simmons, D. (1994). “Urban children’s preferences for nature: Lessons from environmental education.” *Children’s Environment Quarterly*, 11 (3): 194-203.

Wilson, R. (1994). “Enhancing the outdoor learning environment of preschool programmes.” *Environment Education*, 46: 26-27 EJ484 153.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Fear and dislike?: Explore with teachers where children get their ideas about fear and dislike of the natural environment. What could be some of the causes? Then, make a plan together to include increased exposure to natural and living things to offset these real, yet unnecessary concerns.

Sense of the seasons — beyond the daily weather chart: There are more good ideas in this one paragraph about ways to help children understand that things change — naturally — just like our life experiences change. Work with teachers to identify more ways to move past just charting the weather to actually getting a sense of the seasons. Pick a tree to watch, observe where the sun sets or rises, wait for the life cycle of a plant to complete the process, etc.

Taking care of nature — a good place to start: Turning negative energy into positive energy is a fabulous idea. Develop a strategy for each of your indoor classrooms to take on the responsibility of caring for something in the outdoor classroom. Don’t let anyone off the hook. Keep brainstorming until you find something appropriate for each group of children.

Connections — supported by adults: The list of ideas in this section can keep most of us busy for quite a while. Take each idea, assign it to a small group of teachers to plan and implement — such as playing in the rain or planning a family stargazing event. Don’t stop until each idea, and any more that creep into the teachers’ minds as they work on their project, have been implemented.