

# **Building the Young Child's Relationship with Nature**

The more than human world is a multi-dimensional learning environment where children experience and learn through:

- Play,
- Exploration,
- Conversation,
- Hypothesizing and predicting
- Amongst many others

This can help with:

- Development of sensory awareness
- Development of our Interoception and Proprioception
- Build's Resilience and Empowerment
- Creativity
- Care, Compassion, and Kindness towards the environment and the animals that live there.
- Helps to build AWE
- Plus, many other components in the development of young children.

## **Dense Urban Living Environments**

- Lack of access to green spaces
- Studies have found that the higher the poverty, and racial inequality, there is an increase in the lack of accessibility to green spaces.
- Children who live in low-income urban areas are more likely to suffer asthma attacks brought on by outdoor pollution.
- There is an increase in depression, stress, and anxiety from living in dense urban environments.

- When young children have lack of access to outdoor spaces such as parks, gardens, and other natural surroundings. It affects the development of their sensory experiences, play and exploration, which in turn affect's all domains of development.
- Creativity can be impaired, which can affect problem solving and self-regulation.
- Holistically, children develop less compassion, kindness and understanding of the natural world, and how human's fit into the eco-system.
- Resilience and self-empowerment can be affected.
- There are emerging studies showing that low accessibility to green spaces, and high air pollution exposure is linked to ADHD.
- Has an impact upon a young children's developing Neuroception, Interoception, and Proprioception.

## What is Neuroception, Interoception, and Proprioception In the development of young children in nature-based play and learning

"Neuroception" was coined by Dr. Stephen Porges, and describes how our neural circuits can distinguish whether a stimuli is safe or dangerous.

When children are exposed to environments such as urban dense environments, where there's an increase in stress and depression. This long-term stimuli affects our sympathetic nervous system (the flight, or fight response).

*For example*

A young child who lives in the city, and has very limited access to green spaces, may view nature as a threat or danger, "the forest is scary and there are dangerous creatures who live there!"

Whereas a young child who has access to green spaces to play and explore (such as parks, their own back garden, camping and vacations in nature), may view nature as a magical place to role play and have adventures.

When young children aren't given the opportunity to experience the accessibility to green spaces and nature over long term, it may have a detrimental effect upon the autonomic nervous system that's similar in ways to that of young children who were exposed to trauma or traumatic events.

“Interoception is the ability to be aware of internal sensations in the body, including heart rate, respiration, hunger, fullness, temperature, and pain, as well as emotion sensations. Many people consider interoception to be an additional sense that is critical to the way we understand how we feel on a moment-to-moment basis.” – *American Psychological Association*, By Kirsten Weir, Date created: April 1, 2023, Vol. 54 No. 3

Proprioception, also known as kinesthesia, is our ability to sense our body in space, such as movement, action, location.

A child who runs in an urban city – runs on concrete, climbs stairs and steps, breaths in pollution, exposed to constant human noise pollution.

A child who runs in nature (park, back garden, beach, forest, etc.) runs on different surfaces, breaths in cleaner air, less exposure to human noise pollution.

# **Awaken the sense of AWE for the more than human world in Young Children**

## ***Starting point***

- Read books about the more-than-human-world, connecting nature that's around you rather than in a far-off place or country.
- Hands on projects such planting an indoor or outdoor garden – talk to a local nursery or master gardener association for help in deciding what plants or dwarf trees would be safe and manageable for your age group.
- Study your local Watershed and see where it starts and ends, what animals, plants, etc. live in and around it.
- Ask the children what they would like to study or build in relationship to the more-than-human-world around them, you might base this off some of the books you've read.
- Talk to children about the “senses” and ask them what ones they'd use if they were out in various settings of the more-than-human-world.
- Use magnifying glasses for children, and adults!

## ***What is Nature to young Children?***

- Ask children what they think nature is, collect photo's, invite specialist's in to speak.
- Document children's responses through their artwork, transcribe their spoken words for them onto paper.
- Children can make collective nature collages.
- Set up your classroom area from the children's ideas about nature, or jobs working in nature.

### ***Planned trips vs spontaneous moments in nature***

For many folks working with young children who may or may not have access to many green spaces around them planning a trip to a nature area can be an arduous task. Many logistics can be involved from liability forms for parents to fill out, acquiring parent volunteers, coordination of classes, transportation logistics...and the list can go on. This can make a fun and exciting outing a headache for teachers, providers, administrators, etc. to the point of where it might turn into an annual outing to the nature location.

So how can nature exploration be part of the curriculum, that allows for spontaneous moments in nature, if you don't have easy access to it.

- Provide resources for parents to take their children to places of nature, local and further out.
- Explore areas that have urban gardens and encourage families to become involved, or have the school, daycare, etc. sponsor a plot.
- Contact a local university or agricultural college that has students studying various fields of Landscaping design, sustainable gardening, environmental urban design, etc. Many of these students must graduate with a portfolio of work that they've done in the field. You might find a student who would only be too willing to help you put together an outdoor nature area, at very low cost. And the children could enjoy the benefits of nature in a safe and manageable environment! Plus, if you incorporated the opinions and the help of the children in putting together the area, this can be an empowering collective experience for the children.
- If you plant some herbs in your area, you can incorporate the sense of taste by making and having a "nature tea party" (good herbs are peppermint and lemon balm). Or you can visit a local herbalist and see which herbs you can make tea with, that are safe for young children to drink. The children can explore the tastes, smells, and look at the plants where the herbs are from.

## Nature benefits for young children, reciprocity, and the power and presence of AWE!

The benefits for young children having access to nature are numerous, more and more research is being done on these benefits for their mental and physical development. Since Covid, there has been an upsurge in “getting out in nature.”

### *Benefits of nature for young children*

- Helps to develop gross and fine motor skills.
- Encourages play and exploration.
- Builds cooperation.
- Increases cognitive and language skills.
- Builds resilience.
- Helps with developing their Neuroception, Interoception and Proprioception
- It can help with balancing the parasympathetic nervous system (rest or digest) and the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) to a state of homeostasis, as we need both to survive.
- Increases creative thinking and problem solving.
- Appreciation for the more than human world
- Builds self-worth and confidence
- Helps with cooperative play.
- It's FUN!
- Plus many more benefits.

### ***“Movement and conscious breathing help to develop our Resilience”***

However, it's not just the physical and mental benefits that are crucial to children's health and wellbeing. There's also the educational component to this story! “Climate Change” has become a word that's part of our daily lives,

and the young children that we're teaching today are going to be the ones to bear the brunt of this change! This is where reciprocity comes into play, as not only do we have an obligation to leave this planet in a way that is beneficial for the children and their children's children. But it's our responsibility to lead by example, through not only showing the children how to build their relationship with the more than human world, but for us to learn from them, about the importance of building that relationship!

When was the last time you experienced AWE in Nature, and how can you bring that into your nature indoor/outdoor classroom?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

## Components of a Young Children's Forest Bathing Adventure (3-6yr olds)

- Location, is this your own indoor/outdoor classroom forest bathing, or do you need to walk/drive to location?
- Will you need help, such as transportation, volunteers, etc.?
- Legal logistics such as liability waivers, photo release forms, etc.
- How many children and ages?
- Time frame needed?
- What tools do the children need – magnifying glass, pen/crayons, paper?
- Clothing, etc. depending upon time of year?
- Snacks/Drinks

### ***Outline***

For this age group I focus on the different senses, asking open ended questions such as, but not limited to -

- What do you see?
- What do you smell around you?
- What do you hear?
- If you bend down and pick up some earth/leaf or touch a tree, I wonder what it feels like?
- If it's raining, I ask the children "if you stick out your tongue, what does the rain taste like?"
- If you prepare some herbal tea, and have a "forest tea party" you can ask the children what does the tea taste like?

If you have gone to a location, you might ask all these questions and maybe more, depending upon the focus and age range of the children. If you are



doing this in your outdoor/indoor classroom, then you have the advantage of asking any of these question's any day...for all year long! 😊

### ***Creating a sit spot***

I have a friend who for her kindergarten class arranged sit spot's for all the children outside in their garden that they'd planted. Each day they sit in their sit spot and just observe or daydream for a few minutes. Once the time is up, she has them come inside, and they have the opportunity to share what they observed or thought about while in their garden spot. She said the children love the time being outside, and listening to everyone's stories, most of the children are ESL, and she's found this experience has greatly enriched their vocabulary!

### **Resources**

Dr. Arielle Schwartz

Dr. Stephen Porges

American Psychological Association

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### **Nature themes book list**

Earthsong, by Sally Rogers & illustrated by Melissa Bay Mathis

Sun Snow Stars Sky, by Catherine and Laurence Anbolt

The Seeking Tree, by Jodi Dee & co-illustrated by Kaya Oldaker

Jo MacDonald Hiked in the Woods, by Mary Quattlebaum & illustrated by Laura J. Bryant

We Walk Through the Forest, by Lisa Ferland & illustrated by Yana Popova

Tomorrow is Waiting, by Kiley Frank & illustrated by Aaron Meshon

I Hear You, Forest, by Kallie George & illustrated by Carmen Mok

Here We Are, by Oliver Jeffers

Mia's Mountain Hike, by Giselle Shardlow & illustrated by Lauren Hughes

This is Our Earth, by Laura Lee Benson

Possible Sights Around the World

You Are Home With Me by Sarah Asper-Smith & illustrated by Mitchell Watley

One Day On Our Blue Planet in the Rainforest by Ella Bailey

In the Small, Small Pond by Denise Fleming

Hello Scottish Animals! By Kate McLelland

Where Does The Wind Blow? By Cindy Rink