

THE ELEMENTARY CHILD'S PLACE IN THE NATURAL WORLD

by Phoebe Allen

Phoebe Allen's article speaks for the early bonding of children to the natural world prior to the elementary class. She also suggests the continuing exploration of children at elementary age in the outdoors in order to build the necessary sense of wonder and love of the environment to overcome anxiety over the negative realities of the planet's future. The message is emphatic: Nature teaches best of all; inspire hope, not despair.

Connected through television and other media with endangered animals and remote ecosystems around the world, many children worry about the disappearance of nature in a global sense, yet have little or no personal connection with the natural world around them. They have heard about endangered African elephants and tropical rainforests, but children are not visiting their own backyard woodlots or the overgrown meadow down the street. They're not turning over the woodpile to catch worms and bugs, or watching butterflies, tadpoles, mushrooms, and other organisms right at their feet.

Instead of math phobia, children are developing *eco-phobia*—the fear of rainforest destruction, the hole in the ozone, pollution in rivers, acid rain, and the extinction of cuddly-looking panda bears and seals. As teachers, we must guard against the move toward “environmental education” that leaves children with a sense of hopelessness and distances them from the natural world.

The children of yesterday spent hours in the pastures and barnyards of their parents' or grandparents' farms and roamed freely and safely in the woods near their neighborhoods. But today's child spends little time in natural surroundings and is disconnected from the outdoor world. In addition to loss of available wild or rural spaces for play and increased safety concerns, today's child is faced with mounds of homework, frenetic scheduling, and less overall free time. According to a recent study by the University of Michigan, the average American child spends just 50 minutes per week in outdoor activities, half as much as twenty years ago (U.S. Children and Teens). It is no wonder that our culture is at the same time dealing with an

epidemic of “overweight proportions”—the result of inactive pursuits involving boxes that plug into electrical sockets.

Arguably the most important aspect of our work as Montessori guides is providing the children opportunities to bond with the natural world and fall in love with the Earth before we ask them to save it. Naturalist John Burroughs advises us that “Knowledge without love will not stick. But if love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow” (cited in Sobel 14).

Ecologist David Orr cautions us: “Ecological literacy is driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world” (86).

Most adult environmentalists attribute their commitment to the planet to two things: significant periods of time spent outdoors in wild or semi-wild places during childhood and/or adolescence, and an adult who showed respect for nature and served as a role model. “To keep alive his inborn sense of wonder,” a child, in Rachel Carson's words, “needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in” (65).

PRIMARY WORK IS PRIMARY: INITIATING BIOPHILIA

Research indicates that certain brain patterns are developed only if the child is interacting with the environment, and the earlier the better. Early childhood is obviously the most critical period for bonding with the Earth and initiating what entomologist E.O. Wilson calls *biophilia*—an affinity for the living world. Before age six or seven, our main objective should be to cultivate empathy between the child and the

natural world, to nourish his or her sense of kinship with life with stories, songs, seasonal celebrations, and, most importantly, direct experience—close-up encounters with plants and animals.

ELEMENTARY WORK: EXPLORATION

Since exploration is a characteristic of the child aged six to twelve, activities in the elementary years should naturally include collecting rocks and sea-shells, hunting and gathering mushrooms and wild foods, going on treasure hunts, building clubhouses, exploring streams and wading in creeks, searching for amphibians and insects, making maps and following trails and animal tracks, hiking and campouts, and studying local geological features through personal observation. Active vegetable and flower gardening, taking care of farm animals, and connecting to gardens and animals through the compost cycle is also very appropriate for the elementary child, bearing in mind John Muir's words, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" (157).

Dr. Montessori agrees: "...all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity" (*To Educate the Human Potential* 8). She clearly encourages us to offer the child opportunities to get in touch with the natural world:

It is self-evident that the possession of and contact with real things brings with them, above all, a real quantity of knowledge. The inspiration engendered by it revitalizes the intelligence that was interested and wished to know. From all these things new intellectual interests arise (climates, winds, et cetera). Instruction becomes a living thing. Instead of being illustrated, it is brought to life. In a word, the outing is a new key for the intensification of instruction ordinarily given in the school.

There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees, and all the life to be found around them, in a real forest. Something emanates from those trees which speaks to the soul, something no book, no museum is capable of giving. The wood reveals that it is not only the trees that exist, but a collection of lives. And this earth, this climate, this cosmic power are necessary for the development of these lives. The myriads of lives around the trees, the majesty, the variety are things one must hunt for, and which no one can bring into the school.

How often is the soul of man—especially that of the child—deprived because one does not put him into contact with nature. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 18-19)

Addressing environmental problems that call for social action, however, begins more appropriately around age eleven and, hopefully, extends beyond adolescence, giving students plenty of time to study the challenges of tropical rainforest ecosystems and save the whales, as well as opportunities to manage schoolwide recycling programs, for example, or take action on local or global issues.

NATURE-BASED SCHOOLYARDS

A potential bridge between the indoor environment and "the wild" lies right outside our schools' back doors in an area the children can safely frequent on a daily basis. Native plant habitats are perfect alternative planting grounds for our young Montessori seedlings, provided we create green, inviting spaces, not just asphalt-paved playgrounds with boring jungle gyms and blah shrubbery. Native plant habitats in nature-based schoolyards can offer a laboratory for encouraging curiosity, observation, critical thinking, and intellectual growth. These outdoor spaces invite participation and engage children in unstructured physical activity, providing a hidden curriculum that children will discover on their own.

Native plants move beyond "landscape" plants to stimulate the senses and promote inquiry. Edibles and ornamentals create a dynamic, exciting place to be. Flower and vegetable gardens, farm animals, and compost piles create myriad opportunities for work with the botany and zoology nomenclature and with the whole cosmic curriculum. Nature-based schoolyards help transform children from casual observers to stewards of our planet, creating environmentally and ecologically literate children with an understanding of the interrelationships between organisms and their habitats, and an emotional attachment to the Earth.

INTO THE WILD

As Montessori teachers, we have carefully prepared our indoor environments, and some schools have already begun work to prepare native plant habitats in their outdoor spaces, but it is important to remember that we are not the only species that



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prepares its environment. A marvelous, mysterious, and wonder-filled world awaits us in the meticulously “prepared” environment of wild, unmanicured spaces. Nothing more is required of the guide than to lead the children into these wild, outdoor spaces, where they will make their own discoveries.

“When the child goes out,” writes Maria Montessori, “it is the world itself that offers itself to him. Let us take the child out to show him real things instead of making objects which represent ideas and closing them in cupboards” (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 18). “The foot is noble,” she adds. “To walk is noble. Thanks to the feet, the child who already walks can expect of the outdoors certain answers to his secret questions” (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 12).

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Courtesy of Rusty Keeler, www.earthplay.net

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Phoebe Allen received her elementary training in Bergamo, Italy, in 1974, following a year as an assistant and materials-maker in a primary class at Austin Montessori School. She led early elementary classes in Philadelphia and Toronto before returning to Austin Montessori to guide an upper elementary class for fifteen years. Phoebe was president of AMI-EAA from 2005-2009. She currently works as a writer and researcher at her business, Austin's History Detective.

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