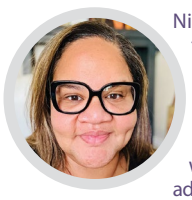
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Go Where the Children Are

Reconnecting to Nature, Together

by Nicol Russell

There is a particular kind of quiet that settles over a group of children when they step outside. It doesn't happen every time, and it doesn't happen instantly, but anyone who has spent time watching children encounter the natural world knows the moment: the chatter softens, the pace slows, and something in a child's posture changes as they crouch down to examine a beetle or tip their face up toward the wind. It is easy, in the middle of a busy program day, to miss this moment or to rush past it. But as early childhood professionals, we have a responsibility to protect it, to notice it, and to build our practice around it.



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The Responsibility Is Ours

Children are not born disconnected from nature. They arrive curious, sensory, and wide open to the world around them. What separates today's early childhood experience from generations past is not a change in children, but a change in the adults, environments, and daily rhythms that surround them. Screens compete for attention. Outdoor time gets scheduled in fifteen-minute increments between "real" learning. Programs move indoors at the first sign of rain or heat. Slowly, without any single dramatic decision, we have allowed nature to become an occasional field trip rather than a daily companion.

> **We cannot reconnect children to something we ourselves feel disconnected from.**

Even at home, where in generations past children might have spent hours roaming a backyard, walking to school, or helping in a garden, staying connected to nature can now feel surprisingly difficult. Families are busier, neighborhoods are less walkable, and free time is more likely to be filled with a screen than a yard. If you're like me, you may even be experiencing a sort of dissonance. My childhood was spent with far more unstructured outdoor time than I can recount. Growing up in Hawai'i, I spent time climbing mango trees or on the beach, swimming or digging holes to fit an entire person. I live in the desert now, and I don't have that backyard to give my daughter—not because I value it any less, but because the world around us has changed. My schedule leaves little time for anything unplanned, and even the simple act of letting her play outside alone, once unremarkable, now carries a weight of safety concerns it didn't used to have. For children like mine, this shift means that early childhood programs may be one of the few remaining places they can count on unhurried time outdoors.

What is true for my family is true for most families I meet in this work. And it means the responsibility to reconnect children with the natural world doesn't rest with children at all. It rests with us. It rests with the teacher who decides whether today's lesson happens at a table or under a tree. It rests with the program director who decides whether the outdoor space is treated as a supervised holding pen or a genuine learning environment. It rests with every adult who models, through their own behavior, whether nature is something to notice or something to get through.

We Cannot Give What We Do Not Have

Here is the harder truth, though, and the one we sometimes skip past too quickly: we cannot reconnect children to something we ourselves feel disconnected from.

Think about what it actually takes to lead a meaningful outdoor experience. It takes an adult who is willing to slow down and follow a child's fascination with a puddle instead of moving the group along. It takes someone who notices the shift in the light or the return of the robins and mentions it out loud. It takes patience with mud, with bugs, with the unpredictability that the natural world brings and the indoor classroom does not. None of that is possible to sustain, day after day, if the adult leading it feels no pull toward nature themselves.

This is not a call for every teacher to become a naturalist. It is an invitation to notice our own relationship with the outdoors, honestly. Do we step outside and feel restored, or do we step outside and start a mental countdown until we can go back in? Do we notice the natural world around us in our own lives, or has it become background noise we've stopped seeing? Our own comfort, curiosity, and wonder outdoors set the ceiling for what we can offer children. If we want children to feel connected to nature, the work often has to start with us, reclaiming our own sense of wonder before we can help children find theirs.

This isn't a burden to add to an already full plate. It's an invitation. Reconnecting with nature ourselves doesn't require training or credentials. It can be as simple as eating lunch outside instead of at a desk, or taking five minutes during nap time to sit with your face in the sun. The work of reconnecting children to nature and the work of reconnecting ourselves to nature are not two separate tasks. They are the same task, and it often has to start with us.

As I'm saying this to you, I'm saying it to myself. Slow down. Go where the children are. See what the children see. Be in nature. Be with nature. Stay connected. Stay connected.

Good for Their Soul, and Good for Ours

We talk a great deal in this field about developmental milestones, learning outcomes, and school readiness, and rightly so. But there is a dimension to children's wellbeing



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that resists being measured on a checklist, and nature speaks directly to it. Call it the soul, call it the inner life. Growing up in Hawai'i, we had a word for it: *na'au*, your innermost gut feeling, the seat of who you are. Children have a need for that kind of wonder, for stillness, for feeling small in a good way in the presence of something bigger than themselves. The ocean did that for me. A forest does it. A garden does it. Even a single tree in a paved courtyard can do it, if we let it.

There is something quietly reciprocal about this experience, too. When we create space for children to feel nourished by the natural world, we often find ourselves nourished alongside them. The adult who has been indoors under fluorescent lights all week feels something loosen when they sit in the grass with a group of three-year-olds studying ants. The director who has spent the morning buried in paperwork feels something return when they walk the playground and watch a child discover a nest. Nature does not ask us to choose between caring for children and caring for ourselves. It offers both, at the same time, if we simply make room for it.

Nature as the Context for Learning

None of this stands apart from the cognitive and academic work we're also responsible for. In fact, it may be the very context in which that work happens best. Outdoors, children are surrounded by open-ended materials that shift and change and rarely give the same result twice. A stick is a wand, a bridge, a paintbrush, a measuring tool. A patch of dirt after rain becomes a study in texture, in cause and effect, in the properties of matter, long before a child could name any of those things. Nature offers what a curriculum kit, however well designed, cannot fully replicate: complexity, unpredictability, and endless invitation.

It is in this context that children can genuinely learn, extend, and enhance their understanding of the world. A child who watches a caterpillar for three weeks straight is doing science, but also patience, also observation, also care. A child who negotiates with a friend over who gets to hold the "special rock" is doing social-emotional learning that no worksheet could teach as authentically. A child who notices that the puddle from yesterday is gone today is beginning to understand evaporation, even if the vocabulary comes years later. Nature does not separate subjects the way a classroom schedule does. It offers everything at once, integrated and alive, and children are remarkably capable of taking what they need from it.

This is why outdoor time cannot be treated as a break from learning. It is not the reward children get after the "real" work is done. It is very often where the real work happens, in its richest and most integrated form.

Where This Leaves Us

None of this requires a dramatic overhaul of your program tomorrow. It starts small: noticing your own relationship with the outdoors, giving children unhurried time outside rather than rushed transitions, letting a child's fascination with a bug or a puddle extend longer than planned, and trusting that what looks like "just playing outside" is, in fact, some of the most important learning happening all day.

Children are counting on the adults around them to hold open the door to the natural world, literally and figuratively. That responsibility is ours to carry, but it doesn't have to feel heavy. I think about my own daughter, and the backyard I can't give her, and I know the answer isn't grief over what's changed. It's showing up for what's still possible — a windowsill garden, a walk after dinner, an unhurried hour outside at school. When we let ourselves feel the pull of the outdoors again, we are not just doing something good for the children in our care. We are doing something good for ourselves, too. And in that shared space of wonder, both children and adults have room to grow.

