

The Rhode Island Early Childhood Newsletter



Preparing for Nature as a Learning Area & The Rhode Island Early Learning

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When designing learning areas for an early childhood curriculum, it is most important to begin with the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards. In a standards based environment, children have many opportunities to foster their development as outlined in the standards. Nature and outdoor play are often overlooked opportunities for teaching and learning.

Nature provides a plethora of excellent experiences which can be aligned with goals of the Science standards. Nature provides an abundance of casual and spontaneous learning during outdoor play. However, being thoughtful and systematic about the skills or knowledge you want children to gain, the materials that will enhance learning, the environment in which learning will take place, and the role of the teacher in natural experiences will serve for more purposeful planning, play, and learning.

Nature as a learning area

In order to effectively prepare children to be scientific thinkers in the natural environment, it is important for the teacher to introduce the information and materials in a meaningful manner. Once the children become familiar with the scientific tools and processes, these items can be a common additive to outdoor play material.

Systematic planning for nature as a learning area begins by deciding what you want children to learn in this area and what skills or knowledge they will gain by utilizing the materials and environment. The science standard found in the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards is a basic foundation for learning in nature.

Scientific goals in an early childhood setting

The first learning goal of the science

standards states, "*Children engage in play as a means to develop their scientific skills.*" Most preschool educators can relate stories of children discovering, questioning, and using tools during the unstructured times of outdoor play. When finding an interesting insect, they discuss where it might have come from, what it might be, how it moves, and many other aspects of the natural world.

Teachers can promote a higher understanding of the second learning goal, "*Children learn about the development of the natural and physical world.*" Providing relevant tools such as magnifying glasses, clipboards supplied with paper and pencils, and a digital camera to record information, will support children in mastering tools, recording information, and investigating changes in both materials and in cause and effect relationships. By answering the multitude of questions that arise from natural discoveries teachers can challenge children in their thinking with their answers and through their verbal observations.

Children often attend schools for long durations of time and will observe the changes that take place with the change of seasons. Ongoing discussions of the state of the natural environment will allow children to explore the natural processes of growing, changing, and adapting to the environment, thus working toward the third learning goal of the science standard, "*Children begin to use scientific tools and methods to learn about their world.*" With previous experiences using the tools and going through the process of scientific investigations, children can make simple observations and begin to predict outcomes and changes. The passage of time also allows opportunities to explore time and temperature in relation to the natural order of the world. Over time and with frequent exposure, these real life experiences will be meaningful learning for young

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Letter from the Editor

No one walked with me. I didn't wear a helmet or wash my hands with antibacterial soap. I skinned palms and knees raw and came home with my clothes full of clinging burrs and mud. And yet, somehow, in a very quiet way, stone by stone and rainshower by rainbow, I began to fall in love with the most intimate details of the world. Young as I was, I'd been awakened to the whisper of snow cascading from pine branches in wintry silence, or to the pleasant gurgle of creeks among the ferns in summer. I felt at once both curious and responsible for all of the life around me, parts of which seemed so akin to my own sense of survival and wellbeing. With my hands in the earth, I discovered the magnitude of my own compassion and connectedness, and found that, as I got older, it became much easier to feel those same things for the people around me. In a way, I sometimes feel that I've been lucky enough to have had two mothers... my true mother of birth, and then Mother Nature, who took my capacity for sympathy and transformed it to a significant reality.

In the next four issues of our newsletter, we'll be honoring the deep connections that can arise between children and the *natural environment*. We'll explore what that means to teachers as they set up their own classroom environments for kids to interact with, and how it affects curriculum and mindset. We'll see how the gifts of simplicity and symmetry and randomness shape creative minds, evoking innovative risks.

The journey outward is ever a journey inward. As we reexamine the idea of *nature* itself, my hope is that we'll discover it's as much about what is untouched *within* us (as in our "natural state,") as it is about what is untouched *outside* of us (as in "the forces of nature"). And so we realize that we aren't simply separate from these things, but an integral part of them. I invite you to join me, readers, as

Upcoming Professional Development Events

Saturday, March 7, 2009

CHILDSPAN's 2009 Critical Issues in Child Care Conference:

Transforming Early Childhood Environments into Low-Stress, Safe Settings

Bryant University, Smithfield

Contact Ligia Diaz:
(401) 721-6407



Saturday, May 2, 2009

RIAEYC's 44th Annual RI Early Childhood Conference

Bryant University, Smithfield

Contact RIAEYC:
(401) 398-7605

Internet Information by Laura Mason Zeisler and Christopher D. Salaun

Interested in exploring more? Try these inspiring websites:

Children and Nature Network:
www.childrenandnature.org

"Building a Movement to Reconnect Children and Nature"

EDC Center for Science Education:
<http://cse.edc.org>

"Improving Science Education for PreK-12"

Arbor Day Foundation:
www.arborday.org/kids/working-forum.cfm%20

"Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children"

Suite 101:
<http://kids-outdoor-activities.suite101.com>

CHILDSPAN News by Christopher D. Salaun

There are some big changes over at CHILDSPAN! In November, Joseph Morra decided to expand his horizons, leaving to pursue other opportunities after ten years of dedicated service as CHILDSPAN's Professional Development Specialist. Joseph's thoughtful insights and fierce organizational skills made every conference and meeting a thing to be contended with. Is there a person in Rhode Island whom he hasn't touched in some way? Joseph will be missed most for his intelligence, his love for word play, cuisine, and cologne, and his dedication to children everywhere. We look forward to working with him in his new capacity as the year rolls on!

Additionally, CHILDSPAN is hard at work wrapping up one of its most successful leadership initiatives. The *Making Connections Professional Development Initiative* is a collaboration between EI Club de Proveedoras Infantil de RI and Children's Friend. Goals of this initiative were to increase the leadership skills of family child care providers and to support them with consistent, high-quality training. The providers who went through the training process are now going through a second environmental evaluation to identify improvements in their programs. CHILDSPAN is proud to announce that six providers have been identified as potential trainers and facilitators for the future. The Child Care and Adult Care Food Program Case Managers are currently mentoring this group to see that they succeed.

As for an update on the Core Competencies: Subgroups (family child care, center-based, and afterschool and youth) have crystallized, and are continuing work on refining and strengthening the existing domains. With the advent of BrightStars, the RI Early Learning Stan-

dards, and new work on DCYF licensing and RIDE approval regulations, the subgroups are making sure that the Core Competencies accurately entwine with these quality initiatives. It is exciting, detailed work. We are expecting that a draft of the three sets of Core Competencies will be available in early 2009 for public comment.

On Saturday, November 15, 2008, CHILDSPAN offered its annual Keys to Quality Conference. The theme, *Nature as the Epicenter of the Preschool Classroom*; meshed nicely with the newsletter's current theme of *nature* (please see my letter from the editor for more information). CHILDSPAN's collaboration with the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association (RIEEA) truly made the conference one of the most relaxed, and therefore enjoyable, conferences ever! Hosted by Save the Bay, this Keys to Quality Conference not only brought many participants in direct touch with the natural world, but also allowed environmental educators and early childhood educators to reach across the aisle, to see how closely their goals actually aligned. Overall, it was a rewarding experience for everyone involved, one we hope to revisit in the future!

See you next season for more updates! —■



Linda Hogan

Professional Resource Review by Karen Lambe

Louv, Richard. (2008 edition). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

We teachers have a challenge: What will the children do today? As we consider the answer, we think about the established schedule or what we do normally at this or that time of day. We think of our curriculum, what are the priorities, the skills that we want to help develop. Is there an assessment test coming up we should be preparing the children for? We know that the classroom environment is an important element in how a child learns. When we think of the outside, natural environment, however, do we think of it as another powerful learning environment?

Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* gives us some fascinating ideas to consider as educators, parents, and policymakers. He describes his 10 years of travel around the country gathering thousands of interviews with child development researchers, environmentalists, parents, children, scientists, and religious leaders that led him to the conclusion that baby boomers are probably the last generation to have been allowed to freely explore and learn from the outdoors. Children born after 1980 seldom hear the words "Go and play outside." With few exceptions, theirs is a world full of planned activities, both during and after the school day, wherein little or no direct experience with the natural world takes place.

Growing up in the 1940s and 50s in Southern California, I recall spending **most** of my out-of-school time outside, recreating the cowboy stories we saw on Saturdays at the movie theater, building forts, and catching lizards. We climbed trees, picked oranges, and experienced—and resolved—conflicts on a regular basis without adult intervention.

It would be silly to wish for the "good old days." There are many societal changes that have taken place since then. But Louv makes a strong plea for each of us to reflect on what the outdoors meant to us, and to think of how much the children of today could benefit from getting back into the wild. He quotes current research that demon-

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Early Childhood Resources in Rhode Island

- Aquidneck Island Directors' Association*
Pam Griffiths, 683-0991
- BrightStars: RI's Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System*
Tammy Camillo, 467-1219
- Child Care Support Network (CCSN)*
Kristine Campagna, 222-5372
- Children's Friend and Service*
Rosemary Dwyer, 276-4305
- CHILDSPAN: Rhode Island's Child Development and Education Training System*
Christopher D. Salaun, 721-6408
- Family Child Care Homes of Rhode Island, Inc. (FCCRI)*
Shannon Trow, 615-9722
- Options for Working Families*
Sandra Gaspar, 946-2300
- Providence After School Alliance (PASA)*
Elizabeth Devaney, 490-9599
- Prevent Child Abuse Rhode Island (PCARI)*
Katherine Begin, 728-7920
- Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP)*
Leslie Gell, 490-9960
- Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance*
Sarah Cahill, 331-2869
- Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children (RIAEYC)*
Jennifer DeFrance, 467-1219
- Rhode Island Child Care Directors' Association (RICCDA)*
Kathie Sandberg, 334-0100 x238
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT*
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, 351-9400
- Rhode Island School-Age Child Care Association (RISCCA)*
Charlotte Boudreau, 444-0750, x102
- Rhode Island Head Start Association*
Mary Nugent, 437-0018 x103
- Rhode Island Head Start Collaboration Project*
Lawrence Pucciarelli, 462-3071
- Rhode Island Parent Information Network*
Matthew Cox, 727-4144
- URI, CE, Children, Youth, and Family 4-H Program*
Marilyn Martin, 277-5255

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children and should be the goals for nature as a learning area.

Materials in nature's learning area

The scientific goals outlined require more than opening the door and running into the outdoor play area. In order for children to meet these goals, materials are needed to support children's interests and needs outside. Teachers must decide what will be important to children during science investigations. High quality early childhood programs will house the scientific tools in their classrooms to be used throughout the school year and in a variety of manners. Therefore, children might have background knowledge of how to use some scientific tools such as magnifying glasses, rulers, buckets, sifters, shovels, clipboards, and other recording supplies. Most young children attending early learning centers will have a working knowledge of buckets, shovels, and sifters from outdoor play. Supplying all of these in a prearranged and structured manner will encourage children in their scientific thinking. Teachers should always be prepared for unusual and spontaneous requests for equipment such as spoons or paint brushes to be used as dusters.

The natural environment

Unlike most learning centers in an early care setting, the physical environment is already prepared for children's learning. It is as Mother Nature intended it. However, prior to working with the children, teachers should take notice of the elements found in their backyard. Jutting roots, ant hills, rock formations and bushes might provide a variety of species and other matter. Of course, it is most interesting to see where the children will lead you. As always, teachers should be on the look out for dangerous or potentially hazardous materials, equipment or matter. Anything observed should be immediately reported to the person in charge.

Guiding children's learning in nature

Although children initiate much of the learning that takes place in a natural environment, the teacher has a very integral role; one that is often disregarded. The outdoor world is an excellent place to employ an emergent curriculum allowing children to follow their interests. However, the teacher acts as guide, facilitator, and provider of relative materials. This should already be taking place within the classroom environment. A science area can house the scientific tools; clipboards can be placed in different learning centers such as the block area, home living and creativity; recording tools can be located in a writing center.

Because of this previous knowledge, children are eager to put it to use in nature after a brief overview from the teacher at circle time. Children can be paired up in homogeneous or heterogeneous sets or groups. Once outside, the investigative teams venture out. Shortly after they have begun, the teacher will hear shrieks of, "Look what I found," and "Come see this!" The teacher's appraisal and observations of the object of interest provide an opportunity to scaffold their learning by posing questions, taking photographs, and encouraging children to record and collect their findings. Fall is a great time to introduce this activity, as it will provide a basis for future outdoor experiences.

Surprise! There's more!

While it is imperative to create learning goals based on the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards, it may surprise some to know that what is going on is not just confined to those goals. The activities, opportunities and experiences previously discussed regarding nature as a learning area actually cross several domains. They also target goals in the following standards:

Approaches to Learning:

Curiosity: demonstrate curiosity and a willingness to participate in tasks and challenges.

Persistence: demonstrate an increased

ability to show initiative, accept help, take risks and work towards completing tasks.

Self Organization: demonstrate an increased ability to establish goals, develop and follow through with plans.

Reasoning: demonstrate an increased ability to identify possible solutions to problems.

Application: use their prior experiences, senses, and knowledge to learn in new ways.

Social Emotional:

Self-Concept: demonstrate confidence in their range of abilities and express pride in their accomplishments.

Interactions with others: develop successful relationships with other members of their learning community.

Language Development and Communication:

Listening and Understanding: develop skills in listening and understanding language.

Speaking and Communicating: use verbal and non-verbal language to express and communicate information.

Literacy:

Play: Engage in play as a means to develop early writing skills.

Early Writing: Children demonstrate an interest and ability to use symbols to represent words and ideas.

Mathematics:

Play: engage in play to develop their mathematical thinking and problem solving.

Numbers and Operations: show interest and curiosity in counting and grouping objects and numbers.

Geometry and Spatial Sense: show an interest in recognizing and creating shapes and an awareness of position in space.

Patterns and Measurement: show an interest in recognizing and creating patterns, comparing and measuring time and quantity.

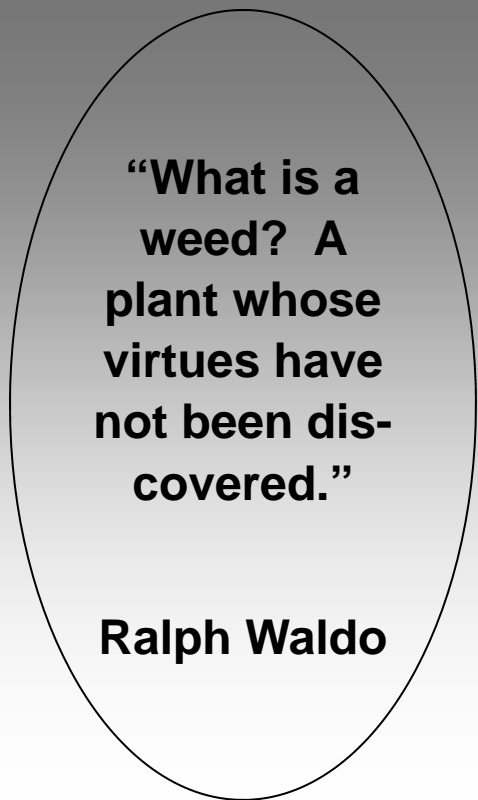
Physical Health and Development:

Gross Motor: increasingly move their bodies in ways that demonstrate control, balance and coordination.

Fine Motor: use their fingers and hands in ways that develop hand-eye coordination, strength, control and object manipulation.

Senses: increase their understanding of the use of their eyes, ears, fingers, nose and mouth and how the senses work together.

By being thoughtful and reflective planners, teachers can provide a wealth of learning experiences in nature in addition to those that children experience on their own. Basing their plans on the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards will ensure that children will be working towards positive outcomes. —■



Children’s Literature Reviews: Nature

by
Melody Allen

Franco, Betsy. **Bees, Snails, & Peacock Tails: Patterns & Shapes...Naturally.** Illus. Steve Jenkins. 40p. Simon & Schuster/ Margaret K. McElderry, 2008.

Stunning collages reveal the many patterns and shapes hidden in nature. Listen to these poems about animals and look closely at the artwork to discover the pattern or shape each animal has or creates. Terms such as symmetry may need explaining, and other words such as foraging will be enjoyed for the sound even if unfamiliar. Observe mouse tracks, sea stars and peacock feathers. Like spiders on their webs who “sit in the center admiring their art,” fascinated children ages 4-8 will begin searching for shapes and patterns.



Capucilli, Alyssa Satin. **Pedro’s Burro.** Illus. Pau Estrada. 32p. HarperCollins, 2008.

Pedro and Papa are off to the market to find a burro who can pull and carry. In the end, a very special burro finds them, and together they head for their home in the mountains. A simple yet atmospheric story for children ages 3-6 whether listening or beginning to read alone.



Rylant, Cynthia. **Snow.** Illus. Lauren Stringer. 40p. Harcourt, 2008.

Snow, glorious snow! Whether it is a storm with big, wet flakes or a light dusting, this young girl loves playing in the snow with a friend, watching it with her grandmother from a warm home, and being surprised when a storm creeps in while she is asleep. Children ages 3-7 will share their own snow stories after hearing this one.



Bishop, Nic. **Nic Bishop Frogs.** 48p. Scholastic Nonfiction, 2008.

A red frog? A see-through frog? A frog that glides? All of these and more are depicted in amazing close-up photographs with information on frog physical characteristics and habits. The author talks about the challenge of taking pictures of a frog catching a caterpillar. He traveled to ponds and to a rain forest and raised some frogs at home. Children ages 5-9 only need to open this book for an uncommon glimpse of these common amphibians.



Nivola, Claire A. **Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai.** 32p. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (BYR), 2008.

One woman missed the trees that once surrounded her home community and realized the impact of their loss on the growing poverty of her country. She started planting trees one seedling at a time. From those seedlings grew not only trees but also a conservation movement to return sustainable forests to this African country. She showed how one person can make a difference in the world, and her efforts were recognized with a Nobel Peace Prize. Children ages 5-9 who care about the environment will find inspiration. —■

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strates when children have hands-on experiences with nature—even if it is simply in the weed lot at the end of the street—they reap benefits. Researchers cite diminishment in levels of ADHD, fewer incidents of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem, enhanced brain development, higher levels of curiosity and creativity, and a sense of connectedness to the community and the environment.

Louv devotes the second half of his book to exploring where, both in the United States and abroad, schools are looking at ways they can use the surrounding ecological community as their classroom, often with astoundingly successful outcomes, including improved test scores. He makes a clear case for nurturing the attitude of environmental stewardship in the young in schools as well as out.

Last Child in the Woods... is an inspiring book, one that will awaken in each of us old, cherished memories, and urge us to do our part to heal the bond between children and the Earth.

Most of the resource books reviewed in this publication in the past five years are available for borrowing from CHILDSPAN's professional lending library. Come visit us and see all the resources available to library members, who have borrowing privileges. Please call for more information: (401)

**Ten Things to Do Outside
With Kids**

- 1. Scavenger Hunt**
- 2. Micro-Hike** (search only a three-foot area for all signs of life)
- 3. Obstacle Course** (over-under, through, tight squeezes, jumps)
- 4. Put a Name to It:** (trees, birds, stars, you name it! Research together if you don't know)
- 5. Skip or Pitch Stones**
- 6. Bug Hunt** (look under everything)
- 7. Animal Charades**
- 8. Start Collections**
- 9. Build a Fort**
- 10. Just Play!** (try it sometime!)