



CONNECTING CHILDREN TO NATURE – PART 2
GREENING CHILD CARE

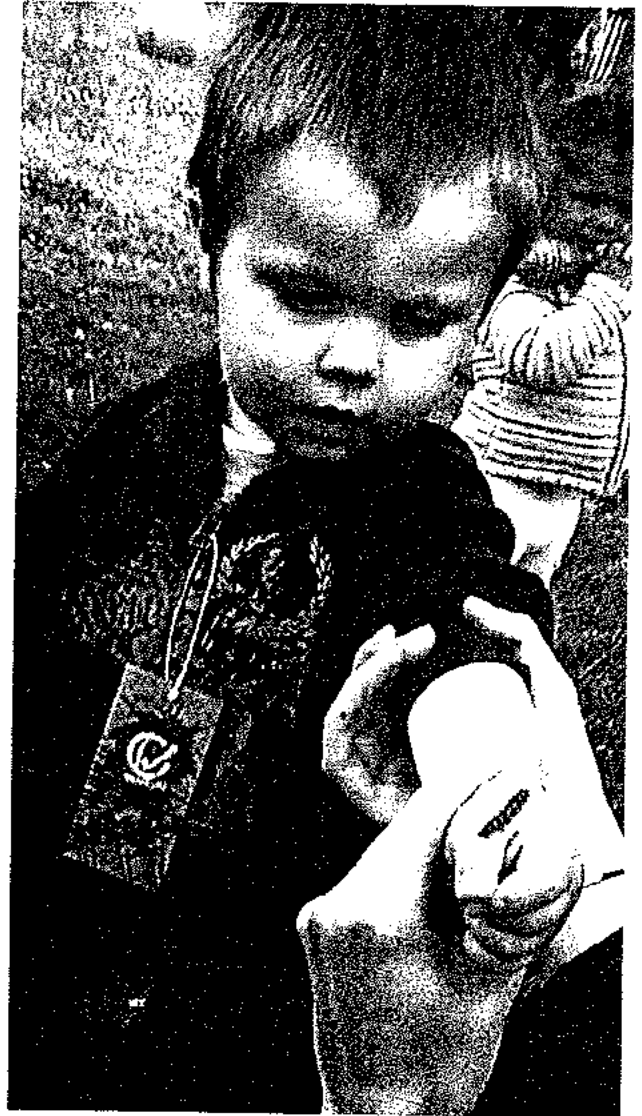
Pollinating our passion for the outdoors

Working in a community
of researchers, educators
and children for natural
landscapes

by Enid Elliot, Ph.D and Natasha
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Our project grew organically, responding to requests from educators who were interested in creating more natural spaces outdoors. An initial conversation with a centre concerned about the safety of their climber led to a small community of educators, researchers and children looking at the possibilities for more natural outdoor spaces. Along the way we discovered the value and potential of sharing information amongst researchers, educators and children.

As researchers we wanted to see how children engaged with the outdoors and also what educators did to enrich and encourage children's engagement with the natural world. Operating in a societal context where there is fear for children's safety, and pressures to focus on academic readiness and structured activities, early childhood centres struggle with society's lack of recognition of the importance of outdoor play. Licensing standards and playground catalogues have resulted in a uniformity in outdoor playgrounds; landscapes have been flattened, covered over with rubber matting, pea gravel and concrete (Elliott 2008).



As educators who go outside each day with the children, and as researchers who study the unlimited opportunities for engagement and learning for young children outdoors, we resisted and questioned the prevailing concern for safety and fear of the outdoors (Blanchet-Cohen, 2008; (Lester and Maudsley 2007). The programs that came together commonly recognized that the children enjoyed the outside space and gravitated to the natural elements available. In one centre it was a rock, another it was the wild area just beyond the fence, and in another it was the hillside with its grassy slopes. Each centre felt that the standard playground structures were inadequate, though each had a different vision of how to create a landscape that reflected the features of that particular place, including historical and cultural aspects. The First Nations program wanted to include cultural aspects in their outdoor



area, the centre for three to four year olds wanted to bring in elements of the rich forest space outside their fence, the infant program wanted to make the outdoors more accessible. Another wanted to spend as much time as possible outside and had children outside at the beginning of each day, rain or shine, cold or hot!

As researchers involved in children's rights and environmental education, we were excited to have an opportunity to think deeply about the outside space with the educators, and to involve young children in the process. This mingling and sharing of perspectives generated dialogues that both inspired educators' visions and provided sustenance for their continued efforts to reach out to modify their outdoor space, and to engage children in activities outdoors. Reflecting on our process, a few ingredients stood out.

The sharing of stories proved a powerful medium for conveying the significance of the outdoors for young children and educators. We heard stories from educators, as well as directly from children. These stories spoke to the sheer delight the outdoors provides children, as illustrated by the intensity and eagerness we heard in the young children's narratives and our observations of the more energetic physical movement and the involvement of all of the children's senses while outside. For example: "I love to run downhill and jump over the benches at the bottom"; "I love to jump from the top of the rock."

Children have an enormous curiosity and are intrigued with the transformations of nature that they experience. For

example, a "What happened to his wings?", "Where has the stream gone?" (referring to the winter time stream on a dry day in spring). We noted, and educators told us, that social interactions were also different outside, calmer and more focused. We noted that children used their creativity and

imagination outside working together to create spaces and plays. In the sand-box, for instance, children figured out how to share the space to create a fort, or in an open area how to move beach logs that took two or three children to lift.

Engaging with experts from other areas, such as landscape architects or environmental educators, helped us broaden our thinking and include different knowledge.

Despite the general pressure to provide climbing structures, research with children shows that they spend very little time on the playground equipment, and more time around and about the equipment (Herrington and Lesmeister 2006).

And while many of these measures have been put in place in the name of protection, studies indicate that injury levels in playgrounds with play equipment have not significantly been reduced (Herrington & Nicholls, 2007). Landscape architects shared their experience in design and expanded our own thinking on the range of possibilities, and how elements from the natural landscape can be incorporated into playgrounds.

Asking the children supported the educators' and our belief about the value of being outdoors for the children. Our discussions with the children helped us focus more closely on what was important to them. We asked the children's



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(Herrington and Lesmeister 2006)



permission to share their information or videotape their discussions. For the most part, children were eager to tell us their ideas and thoughts about the outdoors. Educators began to discuss with us ways to document the children's interests. Just having the discussions had the effect of encouraging the educators to observe and note more closely the children's behaviour, which in turn led to more time being spent outside. As researchers we hoped to gain insights into the meaning of being outside and connecting with natural landscapes for the children and the educators. We did an interview with each program and following one interview an educator emailed us: "I have actually been thinking about the conversation I had with you and Natasha towards the end of November. More specifically the last question you asked: 'What I learn from the children when in a natural environment.' I think probably the greatest thing I learn from the children (or even the best thing I get from the children) is to have a sense of wonder and curiosity about what is around me."

In our discussions, we discovered that every program had a "secret" or "secrets" from licensing. During the research it became clear that educators' sense of agency is curtailed by licensing regulations. While engaging with the children in the outside space and enjoying the children's outdoor play, educators were always aware of whether or not they were transgressing regulations. "Safety" became a governing factor in their decisions with the children outside. The "secrets" from licensing became the educators' way of resisting the oppressiveness of the regulations, and asserting their competence. They made decisions based on their understanding of the children, of the environment and their own experience. Often, these contradicted the universality of regulations.

The regulations do not allow for the uniqueness of different locales or communities. The First Nations' wanted their outside setting to reflect cultural priorities and felt that licensing had no understanding of these priorities, and the importance of making their own decisions about the safety for their children. The other programs had similar reactions. Each felt they knew their children and could provide for their well-being, as well as opportunities for exploration and learning. Each program was articulate in explaining the

difficulties posed by licensing and their rationale to circumvent regulations when appropriate.

Other areas we uncovered were:

- Educators became collaborators with children in discovering and learning together.
- Educators enjoyed being outside and most of them mentioned special childhood memories of a natural space.
- Some educators connected spirituality with being outside.

Over time each program has made changes to their playground. The First Nations program has built a small long house, the infant/toddler program has added gentle hills to their grassy area and a large sandbox, the climber is gone from the 3-4 program—all were planning to make more changes.

We have also begun the discussion with licensing about the intent and application of regulations. With the experience and value of the group increasing, we are now presenting the observations that came out of our discussions with the four programs. Our learning community is growing. We receive feedback and stories from other programs and educators. A network has been created in our community through a listserv. To continue pollinating our passion, we hope to widen the network and connect with similar activities across Canada. Rachel Carson (1965) reminds us that "those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter." What a gift to give our children and ourselves.

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