**Connecting Infants to Nature** Manitoba Nature Summit 2014

I hope that the information provided helps you gain a better understanding of the importance of nature and helps us to collaborate to solve some challenges we may have in reaching the goal of providing early nature education.

Importance of early exposure

Why is nature so important to the children in our care? There is so much information and so many studies that reinforce why it is crucial for children to experience nature. Getting children into the routine of being outside and exploring those natural aspects will help create a foundation for healthy habits in their future. With older children the focus is imaginative open-ended play, physical activity, etc. For infants it is about establishing the roots of fostering the love of nature and the outdoors. It can help them to be more willing and cooperative when getting ready for the outdoors in preschool as well. Lifelong benefits to children who have the opportunity for nature exploration include (as outlined by Dr. Ming (Frances) E Kuo, http://activelivingresearch.org/) lower risk of obesity, lower stress levels and promotes resilience, improves cognitive function, higher physical activity levels, boosts the immune system, improved self-help skills, lower incidents of ADHD symptoms, improved social behaviour and an increased awareness and connection to the environment.

Getting infants outside (plants, bugs, grass, water play, snow!)

Think about objects in nature that may be discovered by an infant; A stone, a leaf, a piece of bark, a branch, etc. How would infants explore this? What would they feel? Think about the sensations you feel when walking barefoot in the grass. These sensory experiences that we feel are everyday experiences are very new and stimulating to infants and toddlers – especially those who don’t typically get the opportunity to explore the outdoors.

* Do allow the infants to explore objects you know to be safe. A bit of tree bark or grass in the mouth isn’t going to harm a child.
* Do discourage an oral child from exploring stones small enough to choke on or small smooth berries (I’d avoid berries altogether if you are unfamiliar with what is safe and what is not) by shifting their interest to something that is safer. Dandelions and sow thistle, cattails, clover\*, wild asparagus, mustard, oxeye daisies, pigweed, sunflower, wild rose\* to name a few. Check out (northernbushcraft.com) for a great reference list with photos if you are unsure of a certain plant growing in your area.
* Do be sure the area has not been recently contaminated with pesticides. If this is the case, avoid allowing the children to explore with their hands and mouths, or better, find another area to play.

Bugs and critters are a great tool to model empathy for older toddlers. Bugs are a wonder to children and to teach them from an early age to be gentle and respectful will help build their respect for nature and the environment as they get older.

* Do discourage squishing of bugs (but do not scold or shame). Encourage gentle hands or suggest investigating the bug while it is in a receptacle like a clear jar or a sand pail.

Frogs and garder snakes are also very interesting to toddlers but use discretion when allowing the children to handle these critters. I prefer to hold these guys and let the children look and see (and maybe touch) while it is being held by me. If a critter like a squirrel appears unusually friendly or is acting out of character (confused, lethargic), exercise caution and clear the area, as these are signs that the animal is contracted with rabies.

Natural materials can be found outside all year round and snow gives an extra element to explore. Remember, eating snow will likely not harm the children so don’t worry if that’s a way they want to explore it (providing it’s not soiled!) Sand and water play is a great way to introduce a natural sensory experience as well. We forget these are natural elements but they do count! The great thing about water and sand is most centres have these materials available to explore indoors as well, and snow is another element you can add to a water table to explore.

Bringing the outdoors in

Take advantage of your sensory tables! Fill them with sand, water, snow, mud, bird seed, leaves and anything else you can think of that will offer a fun sensory experience. Other things you can do with your indoor environment is to plant grass in pots. I’ve done this in a trough planter in the winter and it’s a nice little reminder of summer when days are too cold for outside play. Spider plants are also a great house plant to have as they are safe for children, they thrive in most conditions (they are pretty much indestructible) and they purify the air as most house plants do. Herbs are another great thing to pot, as they fulfill the sense of sight, touch, smell and even taste. Other items you can bring in to explore are larger stones, pinecones (under immediate supervision for choking risk), twigs, reeds, straw, clipped grass, fall leaves and the list goes on. If you have a safe, low shelf fish can be very calming and a natural element that is sometimes overlooked in infant programs. One centre uses a locked cabinet with a cut-out window and stores the tank inside (viewable thorough the window but safely out of reach of little hands). If you are bringing critters in, check with your coordinator first to ensure your critters are compliant with standards.

Limitations and Challenges

One major limitation is possibly not having accessible green space if you are in an urban area. This is when bringing the outdoors in is especially important. Children need that early exposure for many reasons. Get creative – maybe make a nature corner in your room. If you have a small play yard plant some outdoor plants in large pots. Even a pot with tall prairie grass and other native plants will help expose the children to a bit of nature. Garden boxes are another great way to keep some green in an urban play yard. The older children can help maintain these pots and boxes, and that helps nurture a sense of responsibility, ownership and teamwork.

Another limitation is toddlers who orally explore. This was touched on but to reiterate, ensure the children are exploring safe plants and objects. Try to discourage and redirect the behaviour if it appears unsafe, but remember that most things they are exploring will not harm them if consumed (even sand, even mud). Often a child will put something in her mouth and then spit it out. Sometimes multiple times with the same object. We need to remember that this is an aspect of an infant’s learning.

If budget feels like a limitation to you talk to parents to contribute. A house plant, a seed packet, some old pots or containers. Any little contribution to enhance the space helps. Keep a few old nature calendars available for the children to flip through. Post the photos at their level. If a parent or community member can help create homemade wooden toys recruit them for their help. Perhaps someone knows a whittler who can rough out some shapes or even someone who has some tree cookies to donate. These are all little ways to get that exposure in.

Weather can be a huge limitation. I will say a little rain never hurt anyone, but living in Manitoba can pose for some pretty brutal cold. Before I go any further I’d like to outline the Daily Outdoor Play section from Best Practices Licensing Manual for Early Learning and Child Care Centres (P.70).

**DAILY OUTDOOR PLAY**

*Section 10(4)*

Every licensee who operates a full time child care centre or nursery school which provides child

care for more than 4 continuous hours per day or a school age child care centre, shall provide

outdoor play for children attending the child care centre on a daily basis except where:

(a) prohibited by a child's parent, guardian or family physician;

(b) wind chill conditions of more than 1600 watts per square metre, exist;

(c) temperatures below -25° Celsius exist;

(d) wind chill conditions or temperatures exist which according to the policy of the school division

where the child care centre is located would prohibit outdoor play by children; or

(e) other forms of inclement weather exist.

*Guideline*

All children, including infants, are expected to have outdoor play every day, except in the conditions

noted above.

Knowing how many cold days we get here I think there should be a stress on having nature indoors to be accessible for the children. I do want to encourage you to take the children outside whenever possible, and under regulations this should be every day, unless it is -25 or colder. Even 15 minutes of fresh air can make a difference in a child’s mood. I also want to encourage you to get the children to walk on their own when possible. They are small. They are slow. But if your soul purpose for a walk is to get fresh air and explore the surrounding natural environment then what’s the hurry? And even if they make it 10 feet away from the front door they will have likely discovered something interesting, as well as had the opportunity to gain some self-confidence in you trusting them to walk all by themselves. If you head to the park in a stroller allow the infants to dismount and explore independently once you get there.

I think the big thing is to trust ourselves and our ability to be creative. We all have some knowledge within us to help enhance our children’s experiences with nature. Let’s help this next generation to fall in love with nature, as it is imperative to our future. An Earth loved will be an Earth taken care of. If children do not care about the Earth they will feel no need to protect it. It’s our job to play matchmaker, right from the very roots and show this generation that a healthy Earth is a beautiful and exciting place to explore and learn about. Infant caregivers are superheroes! Keep up the amazing work!

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