



dvaeycconnection

Nature and Health

Finding our way to best practices in ECE



What do our play spaces look like? How do our children exercise? What kind of food do they eat? What cleaning products do we use? These may be easy questions to answer. But there are deeper ones underneath: How are we fostering the relationship between our children and the earth? How can we help them understand where our food comes from, and where we all fit in the web of life? How can we invite them to wonder at the world around us? How can we create environments that are healthy for our children, using materials that don't damage the planet? How can we help our children develop habits of eating and moving and being entertained that will serve them well for the rest of their lives?

There has been an upsurge of interest in this rich cluster of issues in recent years, and more and more resources are available to ECE practitioners who want to engage with them. Following are some ideas and resources to help get you started or take a next step.

Play spaces. Here's what Randy Keeler, author of *Natural Playscapes*, has to say: "I know what you are thinking: You love natural playscapes. You dream of providing your children with the opportunities to play and discover the world of nature. But you just don't have the space. You don't have the right conditions. You don't have sunlight or you don't get enough rain. Don't let that stop you! Centers all over the world are looking at their outdoor spaces — big and small — and deciding to take the plunge and begin to add natural elements to their yards. It doesn't take the perfect piece of land or picture-perfect conditions to be able to make beautiful changes to your outdoor space. All it takes is some creativity and helping hands. You can do it."



You can download a whole section of his book from www.earthplay.net. His idea of making a sunflower house is stunningly simple. Plant sunflowers with the children in a big square or circle, leaving an opening for a door. Water them and watch them grow. When they are big, children can crawl inside the perfect little house that they have grown to be.

Or check out *Nature Explore*, a collaboration of the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research. They will be offering two workshops on Saturday at the DVAEYC conference, and on their website you can find a comprehensive resource guide for bringing nature into children's daily learning in sustainable, significant, positive and joyful ways. Their *Learning with Nature Idea Book* shows how well-designed outdoor spaces can facilitate children's overall development in traditional academic areas. Go to:

<http://www.arborday.org/shopping/sourcebook/resourceguide.cfm>

Gardens. In 1904, Mrs. Fannie G. Parsons, a pioneer of school gardens working in New York City, worried that "City children are enclosed amid bricks, stone, concrete, trolleys, trucks, and automobiles; and are therefore alienated from their human birthright of trees, fields and flowers." Sound familiar?

There was a whole movement in the early 1900's to bring gardens to schools, and educators expounded on the ways in which many academic subjects could be linked to garden tasks. A hundred years later, we are seeing a rebirth of this movement. The goals of *A Garden at Every School*, for example, include: using the garden experience as a first step in developing children's

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awareness, appreciation for and connections to the natural world; strengthening their health; and increasing their understanding of the relationships between people, the land, and our natural resources. For more information, go to: <http://www.childrensgardennetwork.org>.

If you want practical advice on gardening, consider the resources offered by our own *Philadelphia Green*, a project of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. They have a "Green City Teachers" program that provides training in skills to integrate horticultural and environmental education into curricula and to help children appreciate the role of nature in their lives. Go to: <http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/green-teacher.html>

Food. There's a wonderful project in Quebec that facilitates the supply of organic and local food to Quebec's early childhood community. Each ECE program is linked to a nearby farm through a *Community Supported Agriculture* network—a system where consumers can buy a share of the farm's harvest, and receive food from them every week. By 2005, 37 centers and homes had associations with a local organic farm, serving some 2000 children in all. Through farm visits, young and old made a link between farm work and the food they found on their plate. Young children were protected from the toxicity of pesticides at the most vulnerable age, and all took a new interest in the relation of food production to our health and the environment.

There are many opportunities to participate in *Community Supported Agriculture* in the Philadelphia area. The Local Food Philly website lists eleven farms that have CSAs with deliveries throughout the city. The *Buy Local PA* website has similar information for the suburban counties. With their goal of growing appreciation for great local foods while supporting the farmers and lands that produce them, there may be opportunities for the kind of connections the children in Quebec experienced. For example, the Snipes Farm in Morrisville PA not only has a CSA program, but also provides a program for pre-schoolers and their parents to teach about sustainable farming while reconnecting people to the land.



Health. Good food and exercise are critical to young children's health, and are more and more in the public consciousness. Michelle Obama has recently unveiled a national public-awareness campaign about childhood obesity. Her program, *Let's Move*, will give parents support, work to provide healthier food in schools, help children to be more physically active, and make healthy, affordable food more available throughout the country (www.letsmove.gov).

Also critical to children's health are environmentally friendly child care centers. The State of Oregon's Environmental Council has taken a pioneering role in certifying child-care centers as "Eco-Healthy" on the basis of 25 steps facilities can take to ensure a healthy place for children. Eco-healthy child care centers commit to reducing a child's exposure to toxins and other environmental health hazards—in pesticides, cleaning products, furniture and carpets, art supplies, plastics and toys, and treated playground equipment. For more information, go to: http://www.oeconline.org/our-work/kidshealth/ehcc/index_html.

Wow! There's so much being done out there, and so much more that we can do. Hopefully this overview has whetted your appetite, and given you some useful leads to pursue. We know that there is lots of experience right here among us in early childhood programs in the Delaware Valley. Please be in touch with your successes so we can learn from each other!

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