

CONNECTING WITH NATURE ISSUE

CONNECTIONions

Supporting quality
child care and education
for all Michigan children.

for a Great Start

**PLAYGROUND FOR ALL
FROM APPS & PHONES
TO STICKS & STONES
THE IMPORTANCE OF
INVOLVING CHILDREN
IN NATURE
BACKYARD
BUTTERFLIES**



CONNECTions

FOR A Great Start

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Great Start is Michigan's nationally recognized statewide initiative to foster school readiness and life success for young children.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation is a public, nonprofit organization working to restructure Michigan's investment in children from birth to five through state and community efforts.

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FALL '11

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From Apps & Phones to Sticks & Stones:

Re-introducing our children to the wonders of nature!

By Jenn Wright,
Kalamazoo Nature Center

Remember when most summer nights the neighborhood kids were outside playing hide-and-go-seek or collecting fireflies to use as nightlights? We spent many afternoons at the nearby creek collecting crayfish, building stick/snow forts, and chasing toads. We didn't know we were connecting with nature. We just knew that being outside meant freedom.

Co-founder and Chairman Emeritus of the Children & Nature Network and author of *Last Child in the Woods* Richard Louv writes about how we have entered an era where many children are suffering from "nature-deficit disorder" and that our "society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature." In fact, according to a 2011 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, today's children ages eight to 18 spend an average of 7.5 hours every day plugged into some type of electronic medium. That is 52.5 hours every week! We now have a society that fosters children who would rather "play indoors 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are." (Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, New York, New York, 2005, p.2.)

In a 2006 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), researchers reported that free and unstructured outdoor play is healthy and, in fact, essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones. It also helps them manage stress and become resilient. Louv looks at this issue from a natural world viewpoint as he points out that not only can nature teach kids science and nurture their creativity, nature needs its children to be its future stewards. Louv sees the restorative power of nature and free play and provides many ideas for change.

The Kalamazoo Nature Center recognizes the importance of connecting children with nature. In 1982, we started one of the first nature-based preschools in the nation. Nature's Way Preschool, currently serves three- and four-year-olds and is a nine-month program. We are dedicated to providing experiences typically found in child-centered programs such as discovery-based learning through play, sensory exploration, large and fine motor activity, creative expression, making friends, and developing social skills. What is unique about Nature's Way is the use of the natural world as an extension of the classroom. Our nine acres of natural areas allow children to experience daily nature walks and exploration through forests and along a creek. The naturalized playground provides opportunities for digging, playing in the mud, climbing on rocks, building 'beaver dams' and balancing on logs.

The concept of going outdoors is not new, but for many it has become the exception rather than the norm. Making a point to get outside with your children, even for a few minutes a day, will provide social, emotional and cognitive benefits that neither textbooks nor computer simulation can re-create. So, put down the phones and electronic devices, open those doors and see what nature has to offer...it's good for adults, too!

“Healing the broken bond between our young and nature is in everyone’s self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demand it, but also because our mental, physical and spiritual health depend upon it.”

Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder

Playground for All

Read about Kara Tiethof - parent, advocate and teacher - learn that the power of one voice can change an entire community.

*By Teri Banas,
ECIC Communications Staff*



Gavin Tiethof was born a “beautiful, healthy baby” by all appearances. He entered the world in Colombia with dark hair and creamy latte-colored skin. At appropriate stages, he cooed, made eye contact, and was a dream personified for his awaiting American adoptive parents.

But by six months old, he was having infantile spasms, debilitating seizures, and by 11 months, he was prepped for a rare surgery in which doctors removed what remained of the left half of his damaged brain, stopping the seizures. In an attempt to prepare first-time mom, Kara Tiethof, for a bleak future, a doctor brusquely told her Gavin would likely become blind one day and also would be unable to recognize her, if he survived.

Kara Tiethof, a member of the Ottawa County Great Start Collaborative and core member of the Ottawa County Great Start Parent Coalition, said Gavin, now 6 years old and the eldest of three Tiethof sons, lives with many physical challenges but he is loved by his family and loving in return. He has big brown eyes behind the glasses he wears. He’s learning to read. And lately, the spirited kindergartner with the huge personality has moved beyond his wheelchair. Thanks to a new physical therapy, he “is scooting on his bottom,” and “starting to take steps,” said Tiethof.

As far as Gavin’s progressed, Kara Tiethof said she’s amazed by her own transformation as a mother, advocate for children with special needs, and activist in her local collaborative and Ottawa County Great Start Parent Coalition. She credits those organizations for helping her find her voice.

“When you have a child with needs, it really changes you. I am certainly much more outspoken than I was before Gavin,” said Tiethof, who lives in Allendale near Grand Rapids with husband Brad and Gavin’s brothers, Chase, 5, and Parker, 4.

“My friends and I all talk about how we are much more outgoing, confident and clear about what we want. That’s because if you don’t advocate for your child, he may not get the services he needs, or the medical care he needs. There are so many experiences in



which you realize, if I don't speak up, he's not going to get what he needs."

Tiethof's outspokenness has made a difference in her community, said Jan Shangle, the coordinator of the Ottawa County Great Start Collaborative.

Two years ago the area didn't have a playground that was welcoming for children like Gavin. That's until Tiethof decided to make a visit to her local township hall to pose the question. Her direct inquiry led to a drive to purchase a special swing that is universally accessible, allowing children of all abilities to play side by side. The parent coalition applied for a grant to pay for the equipment.

“If a child with disabilities doesn't have a place to play, it not only keeps them from playing outside, but it affects the other children in the family and the parents, too, from getting out.”

More improvements to the local park followed. When the county health department approached the Ottawa collaborative for application ideas for a Building Healthy Communities grant project, Tiethof encouraged the collaborative to apply in order to purchase additional playground features to make the park even more inclusive. That served the collaborative's goal to encourage families to become more active, leading to healthier lifestyles.

For families with children with disabilities, it's easy to develop a sedentary lifestyle, Shangle said.

“What we're learning is this is an ongoing issue. If a child with disabilities doesn't have a place to play, it not only keeps them from playing outside, but it affects the other children in the family and the parents, too, from getting out. Families often opt out of going to a park in these cases, and it can create a sedentary lifestyle,” Shangle said.

“It's been a learning curve for all of us. Now we have a park where all the equipment can be accessed by any child,” she added.

Tiethof said it used to be that Gavin couldn't play along side his brothers when they went to the community park. “Gavin had to stay in his wheelchair because there was nothing for him to do,” she said.

What's driven her activism has been the realization that too many families with children who have disabilities inadvertently teach their other children by their actions that more fun can be had if the child with special needs stays behind.

“I know a lot of families in that position,” she said. “They can't go to the beach, to a park, so that teaches the siblings, ‘if we only leave that family member home, we can do fun things.’ ”

The Tiethofs were determined that wouldn't happen to their family.

“We are a family and we do things as a family,” Tiethof insisted. “And we all have value in our family. That's why seeing this park come together is so amazing.”

In planning the park, Tiethof said she started by calling friends who had children with a variety of disabilities – cerebral palsy, hearing impairments, autism – and told them, “Here's our opportunity. If a park is built, what would your children like to play on? What would make them feel welcome?” She visited friends with playground catalogs from which they created a “dream list,” and then pared it to fit a budget.

Today, the Allendale Park has play equipment that includes a drum set that creates strong vibrations picked up by children with hearing aids. There's a bouncy car designed for two that provides easy access and neck support for those with poor muscle tone. Gavin can ride in it with one of his brothers or a friend.

“It's been exciting to see other kids, different kids, at the playground. It's been very exciting and good for my family, personally, to see,” Tiethof said.

Through her Great Start connections, Tiethof said she's learned how to mobilize people, form a common goal and share knowledge. She has also learned that parents have power.

“Sometimes you learn it's not that people don't care, it's just that they don't know. It's learning that 20 phone calls can change a vote,” she said. “In this economy more than any other, parents have a voice that needs to be heard.”

Need Quality Child Care?



*Your Online Child
Care and Preschool
Resource*



greatstart**CONNECT**org 

CONNECT for your one-stop online resource – everything you need to know about what quality looks like and how to find it.

CONNECT and find child care and preschool providers who can best meet the needs of your family.

CONNECT and use the interactive map to locate resources in your community.



Great Start is powered by the
Early Childhood Investment Corporation

*Together we can give every child in
Michigan a Great Start.*

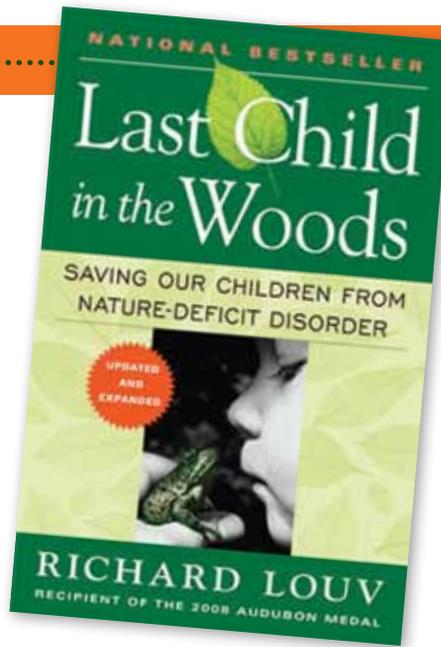
By *Hillary Lang, M.Ed.*
 Quality Improvement Specialist
 Northwest Regional Resource Center

Richard Louv provided the beginning of what has become an international dialogue with the 2005 publication of his book ***Last Child in the Woods***, winning the Audubon Medal for his work in 2008. Parents, educators, health care workers, lawmakers, and conservationists alike have been influenced by Louv's coined term "nature-deficit disorder," a disturbing trend in our society which has led to over-wired children, a disconnection with the outdoors, and obesity rates that continue to rise within all 50 states.

Within the pages of the book, Louv discusses the overwhelming odds facing children in today's society regarding a lack of direct exposure to nature. Without that exposure, healthy physical and emotional development is compromised to a great degree. As "nature-deficit disorder" increases among today's children, attention disorders and depression are on the rise, as well as the number of children who are detached from the natural world around us. As Louv points out, this detachment leads to a generation of people who view the earth as a resource; nothing more than a commodity that can be drilled into, mined, and sold off.

Perhaps it was the fact that we are living here in northern Michigan that created an initial skepticism when viewing the title and cover for the first time. The natural surroundings of the Great Lakes and national forests are abundant, perhaps matched only by the number of adult conversations which review the very same topic: *our kids need to unplug themselves and get outside!* It is a constant topic amid the daily life in the northwest region, yet the pendulum is slow to swing.

However, Richard Louv very quickly erases any doubt regarding the significant impact ***Last Child in the Woods*** is capable of. In addition to giving merit to the endless dialogue that takes place within coffee shops and around dinner tables, Louv spends a great deal of time looking beyond the crux of the issue. He offers solutions. Not just one solution, but



many viable, practical, detailed solutions. Simplistic ideas that can be found within your own backyard...hundreds of them. These ideas include anything from taking a hike together, creating a leaf collection, or having a "green hour" (rather than a "television hour") to long-term projects such as making your own yard a Certified Wildlife Habitat through the National Wildlife Federation, planting a garden, or creating a weather station.

Among the solutions, discussion points can also be found. These points have the capability to engage people of all ages regarding the role of nature within their lives. Louv also provides an in-depth look at the Chicago Wilderness Program's "Leave No Child Inside" movement, as well as suggesting actions that can be taken as an individual, family, school, or community.

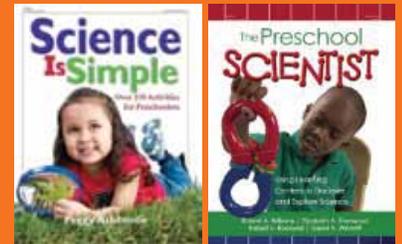
Incidentally, Louv has published a new book (***The Nature Principle***, May, 2011) that points out that another group of people is at risk for "nature-deficit disorder." Adults. We are in need of a balance with nature as much as the children are; without that balance our own personal capabilities suffer.

"The future will belong to the nature-smart—those individuals, families, businesses, and political leaders who develop a deeper understanding of the transformative power of the natural world and who balance the virtual with the real. The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need."

—Richard Louv

Spend Some Time with Nature

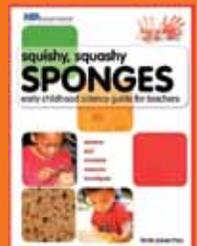
By *Liz Fuss,*
 Child Care Network,
 Southeast Regional
 Resource Center



Science Is Simple and ***The Preschool Scientist*** describe fun activities young children can do that involve nature topics. Even though these books focus on science experiments, some of the activities can be taken outdoors so that children have the opportunity to spend time outside interacting with nature.

**"Soak It Up";
 "Looking at
 Holes"; and
 "Spongy Cake".**

Do those words spark your interest? Would they spark the interest of the children in your care? If you answered "YES!", you need to check out *Squishy, Squashy Sponges*. From painting to cooking, this book offers many activities that allow children to explore those strange objects known as sponges.



Resources; Ashbrook, Peggy. (2003). *Science Is Simple*. Silver Spring, MD: Gryphon House, Inc.

Sarquis, Mickey (Ed.). (2003). *Squishy, Squashy Sponges*. Middletown, OH: Terrific Science Press.

Williams, Robert A., Sherwood, Elizabeth A., Rockwell, Robert E., & Winnett, David A. (2010). *The Preschool Scientist*. Silver Spring, MD: Gryphon House, Inc.

Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder: Resources for Educators

Web Resources

- Children, Youth and Environments thunder1.cudenver.edu/cye

- Children & Nature Network www.cnaturenet.org

- Learning Through Landscapes www.ltl.org.uk

- National Wildlife Federation www.nwf.org/outside

- Natural Learning Initiative www.naturalearning.org

- University of Illinois Landscape & Human Health Laboratory www.lhhl.uiuc.edu

Nature exploration supplies to purchase:

- Acorn Naturalists, www.acornnaturalists.com (Just about anything nature-related you can think of)

- BioQuip, www.bioquip.com (a great resource for pond dippers)

- Carolina Biological Supply Company, www.carolina.com

- Crazy Crow Trading Post www.crazycrow.com (a great resource for animal furs)

- Forestry Supplies, www.forestry-suppliers.com

- Gardening with Kids, www.kidsgardeningstore.com

- Skulls Unlimited www.skullsunlimited.com

Nature Watch nature-watch.com

- Oakiwear, www.oakiwear.com (Fantastic kid's raingear!)

Nature-Based Preschools

- Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool, Midland, MI chippewanaturecenter.org/naturepreschool.htm

- Dodge Nature Preschool, West St. Paul, MN dodgenaturecenter.org/Preschool

- Kalamazoo Nature Center's Nature's Way Preschool, Kalamazoo, MI naturecenter.org/Preschool.aspx

- New Canaan Nature Center Preschool, New Canaan, CT www.newcanaannature.org

- Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool, Milwaukee, WI www.sanc.org/natpre.htm

Play area development

- North Carolina State University's Natural Learning Institute www.naturalearning.org (design ideas, research & resources)

- Earthplay www.planetearthplayscapes.com (design & supplies)

- Nature Explore www.arboday.org/explore (design & supplies)

Nature-based Early Childhood Activities

- Dodge Nature Preschool's book Four Seasons at a Nature Based Preschool, www.dodgenaturecenter.org/Preschool

- Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool's activity cards Naturally Developing Young Brains, www.braininsightsonline.com

- Growing Up Wild!: Exploring Nature With Young Children, www.projectwild.org/growingupwild.htm

- Project Learning Tree: Environmental Experiences for Early Childhood, www.plt.org

Books

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- Cornell, J. 1979. *Sharing Nature with Children*. Nevada City, California: Dawn Publications.

- Dannenmaier, M. 1998. *A Child's Garden: Enchanting Outdoor Spaces for Children and Parents*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Gil, E. 1991. *The Healing Power of Play*. New York: Guilford Press.

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The Effects of Playing and Learning in Natural Settings (*From www.naturalearning.org*)

1. Stimulates all aspects and stages of child development.
2. Offers multi-sensory experiences.
3. Stimulates informal play experiential learning, and natural learning cycles.
4. Stimulates imagination and creativity in a special, boundless way.
5. Integrates children by age, ability, ethnic background.
6. Helps children feel good about themselves. Enhances self-esteem.
7. Offers children a feeling of "intense peace."
8. Centers children in the environment where they live.
9. Helps children understand realities of natural systems.
10. Demonstrates the principle of cycles and processes.
11. Teaches that nature is regenerative.
12. Supports interdisciplinary, environmental education curricula.
13. Provides flexible and forgiving settings.
14. Aesthetically appealing to all people.

The Importance of Involving Children in Nature

By Robin Benson, Program Director
Northeast Regional Resource Center



Living in Michigan, one would think that all young children have access to experiences with nature. It is surprising, though, that many parents and caregivers of young children do not reach out to our beautiful surroundings to help children truly enjoy nature and learn from it. Even in urban settings, there are often nature areas and parks close by to help expose children to natural settings. Many studies have been done that show that being in natural environments can help children recall information, help them learn creativity, improve their sense of wonder, and so much more. Contact with nature also helps children's emotional well-being by helping them understand that they are part of a wider system of life. While interacting with nature, children discover many science and math concepts. They find that all life goes through processes of life and death. What better time than now is there to explore it! Here are some great ideas:

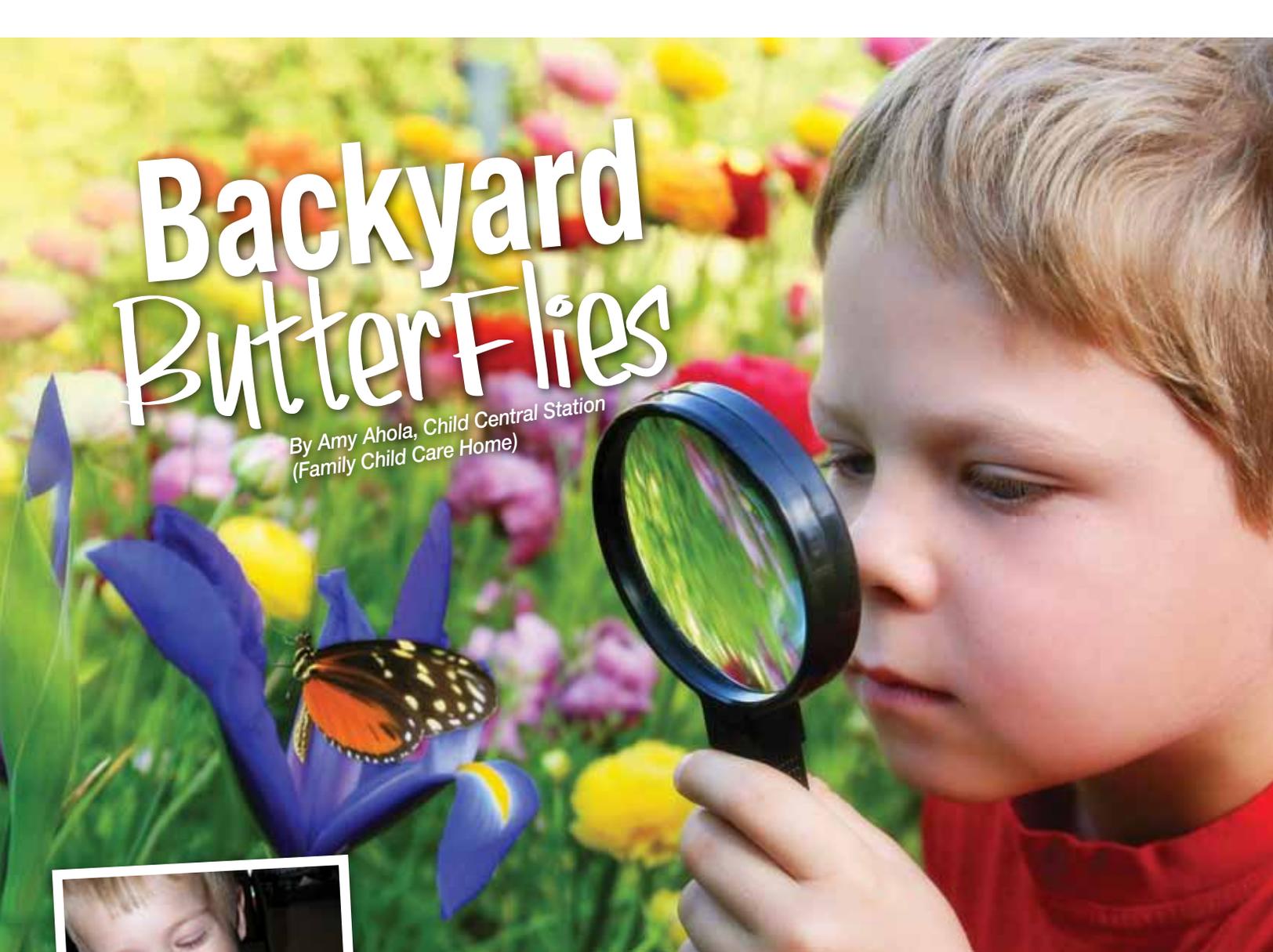
- Take a nature walk at a local nature trail area. Make up scavenger hunt cards ahead of time to have children find items like leaves from various trees (take a guide that you can check out from the library or print online), various insects, sightings of various birds or animals, and evidence of animals such as squirrels, rabbits, or dog prints. Or make a checklist before you go and make it a contest between children – who can find the most?
- Find a small tree and measure it weekly or monthly. Chart the tree's growth over time. Classify what type of tree it is by doing some research together; hypothesize how tall it will become, what its seeds will look like, and more. "Adopt" the tree and name it!
- While nature walking, talk about the effects of littering and waste in our natural areas. See how many items of garbage children can find and discard within a 10 minute time frame or for the duration of the nature walk. Be sure to take hand sanitizer and have children wash up once you return!
- Make use of any local resources of fossils in Michigan and start a fossil collection. Do some research on what fossils represent for ancient life that used to live in your area. A great website for kids is www.fossilsforkids.com. Also, for Michigan specific information, go to <http://www.dayooper.com>.
- With young children, collect a variety of items from nature (without harming living things or disrupting nature areas) such as sticks, leaves, rocks, etc. When you get home, put them in groups by how they are alike. Talk about their characteristics and use a variety of language for colors, textures, and sizes. These skills are important for young children for language and math skills.
- Keep a nature journal and include pictures, written description of the day (with your help if necessary – write as the child narrates), and your child's drawings. A simple notebook can be used to record events.
- Find websites that will help inspire your nature activities, such as www.naturerocks.org.

Enjoy nature at its finest this autumn in Michigan while teaching children many needed skills!

There are so many nature activities to do with your children. Get them away from the TV, the video games, and leave the cell phones at home.

Backyard Butterflies

By Amy Ahola, Child Central Station
(Family Child Care Home)



One of the best ways for children to connect with nature is for them to experience natural phenomena first hand. After all, children are concrete learners. It is our job as educators to provide children with memorable, meaningful experiences. One simple way to engage children in learning about nature and the world around them is to provide life cycle studies, and finding “backyard” butterflies is a great way to do it!

In Michigan, we are fortunate to be on the path of the monarch migration. Monarchs are a great butterfly to study because they are easy to find. The caterpillars or larvae of monarch butterflies only have one source of food, milkweed. This is important, because it means that if you can identify milkweed, you will be able to find Monarch eggs and larvae (caterpillars!).

The monarch egg is only about a millimeter in diameter. It is a milky white color and can be found on the underside of the milkweed leaves. (The photo on the top right is taken under a microscope.)

Monarch larvae are light gray with a black head when they hatch. They are very small when they eat their way out of the egg. (The photo on the bottom right of a freshly hatched caterpillar is taken under a microscope.)

However, as they eat, grow, and molt their skin, they reveal stripes of white, yellow, and black.

Once the caterpillars have reached a length of one inch, they are safe to hold.



The children love to help find, feed, and hold the caterpillars.

After 10-14 days in the larva stage, they hang in a "j" and form chrysalides. A monarch chrysalis is light green in color with gold highlights.

Approximately 24 hours prior to a butterfly emerging, the chrysalis is dark and you can see the orange and black wings.

A freshly hatched monarch has a body filled with fluid. This fluid is pumped to stiffen the wings. A couple of hours after hatching the monarch is ready to fly and feast on the nectar of a wide range of flowers.



As the children observe the butterfly life cycle, it is important to give them opportunities to extend their learning. We created our own songs and finger plays.

"A tiny little egg sat on a leaf."

Hold one hand flat and curl the index finger of the other hand to make the egg on the leaf.

"Out popped a munching, crunching caterpillar."

Uncurl index finger and wiggle finger around.

"It munched and it crunched, until one day, up it went and made a chrysalis."

Wiggle finger up into the air and curl your hand (that was the leaf) around the finger.

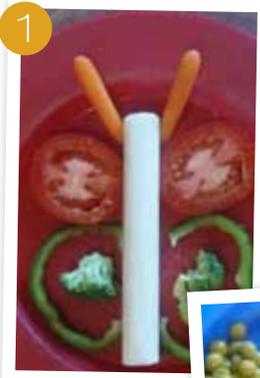
"It wiggled and it worked, until one day OUT popped a beautiful butterfly!"

Uncurl your hand, interlocking your thumbs and flapping your hands to make the butterfly fly.



We also made our food fun with a wide array of eggs, caterpillars, chrysalides, and butterflies.

1| This fun snack is made with a variety of vegetables and string cheese.



2| Homemade macaroni and cheese can be made with ziti and bowties to look like butterflies and caterpillars.



3| This butterfly was made with cinnamon crisps and watermelon.



You can also add craft activities for the children.

4| Planting grass in an egg carton will look like a caterpillar.



5| Cutting the fingers off of a rubber glove makes a great base for finger puppets.



The possibilities for extension activities are endless! For more of our backyard butterfly activities visit www.childcentralstation.com

OLD-SCHOOL OUTDOOR PLAY:

OUTSIDE & UNSTRUCTURED



CONSIDER THIS SCENARIO:

You are five years old. It is a beautiful summer day. You look out the window and see a lawn, a tree, and a bicycle. There is a bucket on the back step and the hose is coiled in the driveway. There is a woodpile next to the fence, perhaps a home to an ant colony or a few hidden roly-polies. What do you do? Chances are you spend the remainder of the day (including as many stolen minutes as you can manage after your mom has called you in) running in the grass, climbing the tree, circling the block on your bike, making a delicious “soup” in the bucket, and collecting bugs. All the while you are breathing fresh air, capturing the sunshine, and learning countless lessons which, though unseen, are significant and fundamental.

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*By Lisa Cooper, Training and Support Coordinator
Western Regional Resource Center*



According to the National Wildlife Foundation's *Be Out There* campaign at www.nwf.org/get-outside, "the average American boy or girl spends just four to seven minutes in unstructured outdoor play each day." We don't need experts and research figures to tell us that four to seven minutes of outdoor play is not enough. What we may not realize is that in the day-to-day of our busy lifestyles, unstructured play has taken a back seat. Soccer practice and gym class promote team skills and fitness, but don't give children the opportunity to expand their experiences while spending time in nature. Field trips to the farm or orchard are special events, but don't give children the time to explore, invent and experiment. The *Be Out There* website reminds us that we can help children grow up to be healthier and happier by simply allowing them time for free play outside.

The beauty of adding more healthy outdoor play to our day is that it costs nothing and is simple to do. The challenge can sometimes lie in allowing children to get dirty and play for long periods of time without adult direction. Relax a little and begin to build more unstructured outdoor play into your daily routine by considering the following:



Go to the park. Make zero suggestions on how the children should play. Stay for an hour.



Close the sand and water table and have a Dirty Day instead. Collect play clothes from parents that will allow the children to get wet, muddy and sandy. Bring buckets, scoops, cups, and funnels, but make zero suggestions on what the children might do in the dirt, sand, or water. Stay outside for an hour.



Make the back yard your new playroom. Set up interest areas outside just like you would inside. A child size table and a basket of plastic dishes becomes the new house center. A pile of cardboard boxes and sanded lumber scraps becomes the block area. A basket of books under a shade tree becomes a literacy center. Packets of seeds, empty pots, shovels and rakes along with a tub of soil and watering can become a discovery center (and it is entirely possible that the children might plant those seeds in the pots without any direction what-so-ever, although it would also be fun if the children made mud stew instead). Aside from safety matters, make zero suggestions on how the children should or should not play with the materials. Stay outside for an hour.

Once we remember how important (and downright lovely) unstructured outdoor play is, we can balance in some group outdoor activities. Many organizations and campaigns exist to help teachers, parents, and child care providers encourage children to invest in their outdoor communities. Play takes on new meaning when tied to conservation, group participation and community improvement. In addition to the *Be Out There* website, visit the following online resources to become inspired and excited about getting kids involved:

National Geographic:
www.kids.nationalgeographic.com
(Look for the section on letterboxing)

World Forum Foundations:
www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf
(Look for the great tool kits)

Let's Move Child Care:
www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org
(Make Mrs. Obama proud)

Arbor Day Foundation:
www.arborday.org/kids
(Check out Nature Explore)

Tree Musketeers:
www.treemusketeers.org (Ready for a challenge? Start a local chapter!)

Remember, perfect weather is not a requirement for beneficial outdoor play. Rainy days, gray skies, snow drifts and brisk breezes become part of the adventure. Embrace our beautiful surroundings as the season changes, and let those kids out to crunch leaves and jump in puddles. Remember all of those creative ways you played outdoors as a child, and once the kids have their turn, go ahead and make your own bucket of mud stew.

Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool

Combining Nature & Early Childhood Education

By *Rachel Larimore*,
Chippewa Nature Center's
Director of Education

Two bright-eyed four-year-old girls sat patiently waiting for the speech therapist to ask her next question. The therapist's focus for the day was the "b" sound, so she placed an image of a bird on the table in front of the girls. She then pointed and asked, "What's this?" The two four-year-olds proudly answered, "Woodpecker!" They were correct. The therapist was confused—most four-year-olds would have said bird. What the therapist had forgotten was that she wasn't working with typical four-year-olds. She was working with students in Chippewa Nature Center's (CNC) Nature Preschool!



CNC's Nature Preschool, located in Midland, Michigan, is one of approximately 20 nature-based preschools in the U.S. associated with a nature center. Nature-based preschools are licensed preschools that strive to provide meaningful connections with the natural world through activities that are developmentally appropriate for young children. At CNC, 3- and 4-year-old children attend two to four days per week, September to May, for three-hour sessions.

Why are nature preschools such an effective model? Research continues to show time and again the power of nature on a child's overall development. This includes their cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development.

Intellectually, nature provides an ever changing environment for children to explore and discover in order to build on their existing knowledge and experience. In nature, children learn to observe the world around them and then develop the ability to sort and classify. A prime example of this is the girls above who knew there are many kinds of birds and were able to identify and classify the bird shown as part of the woodpecker group.

Nature is a great teacher for a child's physical development as well. A wet log, that was dry yesterday, suddenly provides a new challenge for the child in terms of balance and coordination. Walking and running over uneven terrain, through a thick understory, or around a squishy wetland all provide different opportunities for physical development—from sheer muscle strength to body control and balance.

It's in early childhood when a child's sense of wonder is at its peak. Nature provides endless opportunities for children to find wonder and in turn ask questions about the world around them. This helps build their intellectual capacity, while creating a sense of place in the world. This sense of place contributes to their social and emotional development, and ultimately their sense of self. Students also develop their social and emotional skills by interacting, discovering, creating, and problem solving with other children and teachers.

CNC's Nature Preschool emphasizes daily outdoor experiences (EVERY

day unless the weather is dangerous), teachers as discoverers alongside the children, and seasonal-based learning. At Nature Preschool a typical class day starts outdoors in one of our two natural play areas for two primary reasons: 1) the children are already dressed so it's one less transition and 2) it shows the value we place on outdoor time by doing it first. These two play areas include very few elements you'd see in a "traditional" playground such as slides and swings. Instead, the play areas include lots of natural elements and "loose parts" such as logs, rocks, and leaves. These loose parts lead to creative, inventive, open-ended play. Sandboxes, stump circle for group meetings, painting easel, wigwam frame, and hollow logs are some of the other items you'll find.

Once all of the children have arrived and had a chance for free, unstructured play the teachers will gather the class at the stump circle to prepare for the group adventure outside of the play area. The exact adventure varies seasonally and focuses on the natural events of that particular season. For example, in spring the hikes often focus on tapping maple trees and then collecting the sap. In the fall the kids may head out with their teachers in search of insects.

All of this outdoor time adds up to about an hour and a half, although on really nice days in the spring and fall, the entire class is held outdoors. Classroom time includes a large group meeting, snack, one hour of uninterrupted choice time in the classroom, and small group. At Nature Preschool we use Creative Curriculum® and you'll see nature is integrated into each of the different interest areas in the classroom. For example, you'll find pinecone collections in the discovery area, squirrel calls in the music area, field guides in the library, and skulls and furs throughout the room.

Nature-based preschool programming doesn't have to be limited to a nature center. Nature is all around you—even in towns and cities. Integrating nature into early childhood programming can be a very powerful tool. After all, it was 4-year-old Nature Preschool students who knew it wasn't just a bird in the picture—it was a woodpecker!

Department of Human Services' Message

Starting October 1, 2011, the Department of Human Services began enforcing a lifetime limit for the Family Independence Program (FIP). Families reaching this limit will no longer be eligible to receive cash assistance; however, there are a number of resources available to assist families in this transition.

If you are impacted by the lifetime limit, please call 1-855-763-3677 (Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.) where expert caseworkers are available to assist you in connecting to these resources.

The additional resources listed below are also available to Michigan families:

United Way referral service Dial 2-1-1 or visit www.uwmich.org/2-1-1/2-1-1-call-centers for information and referrals to a variety of local and statewide supports.

Michigan Works! - Visit www.michiganworks.org to schedule an appointment with the nearest Michigan Works! Office. Michigan Works! offers many resources to assist with education and employment needs.



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Great Start Regional Resource Centers



CONFERENCES

upcoming CONFERENCES & TRAINING

- NOV 5, 2011** Biennial Conference of the Great Lakes Bay Region
"Together for Kids Parenting Conference"
Northwood University,
MIDLAND, MI
- NOV 12, 2011** Community Sharing for Healthy Caring
Regional Early Childhood Conference
Howell High School Campus
HOWELL, MI
- NOV 18, 2011** 19th Annual Parenting Awareness Michigan Conference
Kellogg Hotel & Conference Center
EAST LANSING, MI
- JAN 28, 2012** Kent Regional 4c
38th Annual Early Childhood Conference
"It All Adds Up to Excellence!"
Crowne Plaza,
GRAND RAPIDS, MI
- FEB 4, 2012** Coming Together for Children's Conference
(sponsored by LCC and CMAEYC)
Lansing Community College
LANSING, MI



**Toll-Free 1-877-614-7328 or
1-877-61GREATSTART**

- Upper Peninsula Region
- Northwest Region
- Northeast Region
- Central Region
- Eastern Region
- Oakland-Macomb
- Southwest Region
- Southeast Region
- Wayne
- Western Region