

# 10

## NURTURING YOUR CHILD WITH NATURE



For the young child, what does it feel like to be alive? I believe it's about experiencing the awe, wonder, and beauty of the natural world. It's about connecting with nature through the senses – through touch, movement, sight, hearing, and smell – in fact, with all the senses. For the very young child, life is less about knowing than it is about feeling. Children feel themselves into life with their whole body and with all their senses. Time spent in nature plants seeds that produce knowledge and wisdom in a child's later years, but in the early years the seeds need to be planted in well-prepared 'soil.' Nature provides this nourishing soil that nurtures the young child's senses. Experiencing nature's beauty in everyday life excites and delights young children, while at the same time calming and grounding them. This is because nature offers sensory-rich experiences that are not overstimulating. Your child's ability to be at home in their body, to feel inner joy, to be grounded, to feel connected to life, has everything to do with experiences that nurture their senses. Nature is a powerful antidote to stress and overwhelm, and young children need a daily experience in nature because, for them, sensory overwhelm happens easily. Even life's little stresses accumulate and eventually lead a young child to behave in

ways they cannot control – especially when it comes to their behavior, which is already difficult for them to regulate.

Research shows us that both body and brain are well nourished in nature. That nature regulates our emotions, calms us, and reduces stress. We just feel better in nature. Nature has the power to lift our mood and calm our nervous system. Being bathed in ‘green’ and ‘blue’ spaces creates a peace within by the very fact that the body is brought to a restful state by being able to breathe more deeply. What does it mean to bathe our senses in a natural environment? It is to be immersed in the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. When you are present with your child in a natural setting, make it an experience where you both simply take in the environment with all your senses, and this will be one of the most nourishing things you can do. You’ll find how simply being quiet among trees or listening to the waves as they rhythmically wash up on the shore is calming. You’ll find that the simple act of observing nature helps you breathe more deeply and lowers stressful feelings while at the same time increasing your sense of well-being. Nature is a powerful antidote to life’s stressors and calms the negative effects of a life that moves too fast. When you are rushed, stressed, and overwhelmed, your child feels it, too, so it’s not surprising that your child’s sensory system will also become overwhelmed and that behavior challenges will increase.

Understanding that the young child’s senses are wide open guides us to the insights needed to make certain they receive nourishing sensory experiences that support their development. Young children don’t analyse, they do not discern nor reflect; instead, they take in the environment around them without discretion. This is because they are like sponges, taking everything in, and this is why we, as parents and caregivers in the lives of young children, need to be discerning about where we choose to take them and what we choose to expose them to.

## Nature and the Foundational Senses

When you think about your child's healthy development, one of the most important areas on which to focus your attention is the foundational senses: the sense of touch, well-being, self-movement, and balance. These four senses are the building blocks for the healthy development of all the senses. By nurturing your child's senses early in life you can help avoid challenges to their nervous system, not only as they grow but also into their adult life. For more on the senses, see the chapter on 'Nurturing Your Child's Physical Well-Being.' Hannah Jackson, a Waldorf educational support therapist has this to say about the foundational senses:

Think of the foundational senses as being placental nourishment for all the other senses. When there's been a lack of nurturing of the senses in the early years it leaves the very foundation of the sensory system underdeveloped which will eventually show up as a need, a need for more focused effort on nourishing these senses.

When my children were young, I prioritized nourishing their senses, as well as mine, to achieve less stressful days. You might be wondering what this means. Nourishing your child's senses centers around holding on to the daily rhythms and routines you create, at least as much as this is within your control. Just as the reptilian brain, the oldest part of the brain, needs nurturing for a sense of safety and awareness of self and others, it also affects the healthy development of the higher senses (hearing, the sense of language, the sense of concept or thought, and the sense of self or ego). The four foundational senses – the sense of touch, the sense of well-being, the sense of self-movement, and the sense of balance – all need deep nurturing in the first seven years of life for the development of healthy higher senses.

To experience the sense of touch in a natural way, let your child touch smooth, rough, moist, wet, and dry textures – pine cones laying on a bed of pine needles, tree trunks, water in a stream, rough and smooth rocks, and, yes, even mud. These are powerful ways for your child to connect to, and be in relationship with, nature.

## The Little Book of Parenting

Children need as many excursions in nature as possible, and for that matter, so do we, too. Even if it's only for brief moments, when children spend time in nature they are more cooperative, and their ability to listen, focus, and pay attention improves. Time in nature reduces behavior challenges and increases your child's ability to be compassionate as well as empathetic. Time in nature gives a positive outlook and puts your child in a happier mood. Nature never fails to capture and hold the attention of children, so let your child lead the way. Observe what experiences nourish them. Will they go down a muddy pathway, or choose to walk a forest floor strewn with acorns, or run in open fields where tall grasses grow? Will they stop to listen as birds sing from treetops or fly overhead, or to feel the breeze as it gently blows by them? Will they pay attention to the rustle of leaves as the wind blows through the branches of trees? Will they notice the colors of fall as the leaves change from all their shades of green to vibrant reds, yellows, orange, and everything in between?

Let your child walk on uneven pathways. Let them sit and lie on the ground, and wonder at the magnificence of the sky and clouds. Let them look with wonder at the trees stretching up high without being questioned. Let them walk on logs and let them touch the roots of trees, moist earth, and moss. Let them experience all of nature without you overexplaining, questioning, or saying, 'Be careful, you might fall' or 'Don't run!'

Simply allow them to soak in the beauty, wonder, and mystery of nature. To be able to freely be with nature is grounding and calms the nervous system. Life is slow outside, and this is why excursions in nature nurture all the senses and improve your child's ability to self-regulate, focus, and concentrate. Time in nature builds curiosity and responsibility for the earth, develops resilience, promotes positive mental health, stimulates the imagination, develops creative problem-solving skills, boosts immunity, and even has the power to elevate your child's happiness.

## Nurturing Your Child with Nature

My early childhood years were spent in Nigeria, the country of my birth, and in those early years my senses were ‘bathed’ and deeply nurtured in nature. Our backyard ended where a forest began, so I was drawn to play and explore in these natural surroundings. For this reason, I’ve always been drawn to nature, particularly forest life. I’ve experienced how nature nourishes on both a physical and emotional level while at the same time awakening an awareness in us to what surrounds us.

Many years later, as a Waldorf preschool teacher, I was inspired to design and build a small forest within the fenced-in garden that was part of the preschool’s outdoor play space. From my own experience as a child, I believe that a daily forest experience nourishes the senses on a deep level, as it did mine. Time in nature is a natural way for your child’s senses to be nurtured while playing and exploring. The children who attended the program could freely play in the forest because it was fenced in, and this made for a natural way for them to be in and explore the forest, at times on their own and at others with friends. There are endless health benefits to being in a forest setting. It provides nourishment for the physical, emotional, and spiritual parts of us. It offers us experiences of awe, beauty, wonder, and mystery, while being a powerful antidote to our rushed, stress-filled, and overwhelmed lifestyles.

The mystery and magic of forest life, revered in many folk and fairytales from around the world, awakens us to the wonder and beauty to be discovered in these natural environments. What is it about forest life that draws us, heals us, and brings us joy? Perhaps because it’s a place where stress and sadness can be released. It’s a place to simply enjoy being alive and at peace in – a natural setting that asks nothing of you other than to be present, which is just where young children naturally want to be.

When my children were young, we would spend a day at a nearby beach as often as possible, and whenever the opportunity arose, we planned beach vacations – which we still do. We find time at the beach to be calming as we

listen to the rhythmic sounds of the waves washing up on the shore or walk bare-foot across the sand. Time in nature not only nourishes the senses but also builds a relationship to the seasons and memories of shared family experiences.

## **Bringing Nature In: Seasonal Tables**

Another way to deepen your family's shared experiences of nature is by creating a seasonal table in your home where you celebrate the seasons and nurture your family's relationship with your natural surroundings.

Years ago, as a young mother, learning about seasonal tables awakened in me memories of my childhood adventures in the forest. When I first saw a seasonal table, I was drawn to learning about the whys behind it and I was interested in creating one in my home for my son, who at that time was two years old. Essentially, a seasonal table is where, together with your child, you create a nature scene that reflects what's going on outside in nature. It's another way to build a relationship with the natural world around you. The seasonal table makes it possible for your child to touch and explore the natural objects they collect on walks or in their own backyard. The seasonal table is meant to intentionally bring a child into closer relationship with nature and the seasons.

Objects collected in nature such as pine cones, acorns, pebbles, leaves, feathers, pieces of wood can have a place on the seasonal table. Mindfulness and respect are important when gathering objects in nature. You can teach your child that picking leaves from the ground is more respectful than pulling them off trees or bushes.

One of the benefits of creating a seasonal table is that it encourages an interest and respect for the natural world while your child learns about nature in a more intimate way. It's also one way to cultivate an intimate relationship with nature and a caring helpful attitude for the Earth.

## Nurturing Your Child with Nature

Creating a seasonal table is a natural way to get you and your child outside every day, exploring and gathering treasures. Objects that are gathered and brought back to the seasonal table can be helpful in teaching your child about the world around them, as learning happens when their nature treasures are explored in depth in the intimate setting of home. A trip to the beach could include finding two or three seashells to take home and study more closely, perhaps by looking at their shapes and sizes and by listening to how they sound when pressed up to an ear. Instead of being focused on teaching your child the names of everything that's gathered, what's more important is that they are given time to investigate, touch, explore, and be the scientist that they naturally are.

A whole world opens up for your child when they have time to explore at their own pace, with their focus on discovering what's new and what's interesting. But exploring will not be their only interest in the treasures they collect. Because the young child's approach to life is through play, they will want to play with the objects they've collected. Playing with objects from nature provides a rich sensory experience of touch, and because they are open-ended (see Chapter 9), they enrich the imagination. The object can become anything a child wants it to be. As one of the four foundational senses, it's important that the sense of touch is developed to its fullest in early childhood, and the experience with touch that your child will have when playing with their seasonal table treasures will strengthen this sense as well as their fine motor skills and deepen their connection with their body right to their fingertips. In playful ways, they'll touch rough and smooth surfaces and textures that are soft, gritty, damp, and cold, and this nourishes the sensory system.

As you think about what you might include on your seasonal table, I encourage you to think about including fresh flowers as well as seasonal foods. As you gather a few flowers from your garden, you can take the opportunity to name

them in a way that's natural. For example, you can say, 'Let's add a couple of these daisies.' Or, 'How about these red and pink zinnias?' Or, 'I see you chose some lavender. It smells wonderful.' Your child will learn without any pressure.

Keep it very simple when introducing a seasonal wholefood to your seasonal table. Maybe it's a favorite type of apple that your child likes, or a squash, or nuts in their shells. You can also choose to include a photograph of a seasonal recipe you want to try or perhaps a cookbook where you've marked recipes that your child is interested in trying. This is one way to interest your child in new foods or even foods that they've tried and liked before but aren't quite so sure about trying again. What's valuable about including a seasonal food on your table is that you will be showing photos of new foods to try as well as seeing what your child is interested in as well as including them in preparing the recipe. This experience builds your child's awareness of seasonal foods.

#### **HOW TO SET UP YOUR SEASONAL TABLE**

Any table that fits into a spot where the table is visible will do. I found that thrift stores work well if you don't already have a table in your home to use. If there isn't a spot for a table, you can always use a shelf or a deep windowsill and this is where you will create your nature scene. First, choose a small tablecloth in colors that reflect your natural surroundings and the season you're currently in. If you live by the water and visit the beach often, you can reflect this in your seasonal table with various colors of blue to capture the feel of water, waves, and blue skies. If you live in a forested area, you might choose browns and greens with some blue for the sky. Aim to build a connection with your natural surroundings that will make your nature scenes meaningful. For your child to take interest in the seasonal table and to keep that interest alive, let them be involved as much as possible. If you over-instruct them to do what you envision, they will quickly



## Nurturing Your Child with Nature

lose interest. See what interests your child and let them be creative. Your family's seasonal table has the potential to hold a special place in your home.

As you begin to create your seasonal arrangement, it's important to consider the colors you will use for the backdrop and on top of your table. You can consider the following colors to embrace the mood of each season: light greens, pinks, and pale yellows for spring; dark yellows, dark greens, and purple for summer; reds, oranges, and browns for fall; and blues, white, and silver for winter. It's just as important to be mindful of each season's mood. Spring evokes feelings of hopefulness, new growth, and renewed energy. Summer's bright sunlight evokes feelings of happiness, excitement, enthusiasm, and being carefree. Winter evokes a sense of serenity, peace, and calm while the depth of colors in fall evokes strength, courage, and passion. What does each season represent for you? Noticing the energy and mood of each season will help you to discover the many ways you and your child can connect with the seasons.

Taking care of your seasonal table by tidying it up weekly is an intentional activity to do with your child. Begin by taking everything off the table and setting it aside. Shake out the cloth before replacing it. This is an opportunity to change the cloth if desired. Next, with your child, decide what you want to start placing back on the table and what new things you will look for to add in the coming week or two. Some items will need to be dusted or cleaned. You might need to replace water in vases or water little plants that you have on the table. Some items will need to be returned to nature. Now's the time to go out for a walk with your child and collect new treasures while 'thanking' and returning those that had time on your table. These steps are all part of the weekly routine that will help you care for your seasonal table and keep it 'alive' and beautiful. And just as nature is always evolving and changing, so, too, will your seasonal table.

As your family adds new items, talk about where the found items have come from and how they are connected to the season. Consider how you can build a

connection with the items and the season you are currently in as it will have an impact on your child's relationship with their natural surroundings. As one season transitions to the next, you can begin to transition your seasonal table by observing what's happening in nature around where you live. For example, when mirroring the winter season on your seasonal table, if it doesn't snow where you live, it's best not to have snow on your seasonal table. You should still talk and read about places where it does snow and places where during the 'winter' it's warm or even hot. Stories about places where other people live give children 'windows' out into the world and expand their imagination.

Festivals, birthdays, holidays, and even vacations that take place throughout the year can be honored on your seasonal table. Perhaps you will consider honoring every family member's birthing by including special items for them on the table. Some of the items could be their favorite flower that grows in that season, like daffodils or tulips for a spring birthday, a card that has pressed flowers or leaves, a beautiful rock or crystal, and little candles in wood, ceramic, or metal candleholders.

It's special to honor whatever religious festivals you celebrate on your seasonal table. I encourage you to plan before creating it by first making a list of all the items that you want to include. For example, I celebrate Easter, and because it falls in the spring season in the northern hemisphere, I include pale pastel colors in my seasonal table. I start by gathering three or four pussy willow or forsythia branches and put them in a vase with water as my Easter tree. I love that the pussy willow branches sprout leaves and the forsythia flowers bloom early when brought indoors. On the 'tree,' I hang blown-out eggs that I've painted. This becomes the focal point of the



## Nurturing Your Child with Nature

seasonal table. I then add little wooden rabbits as well as a hen with her chicks to represent new birth. I often sprout wheatgrass seeds in a flower tray, along with miniature daffodils. Whatever religious festival you celebrate, begin with what you want the focal point to be and then consider what items you want to add that reflect the meaning of the festival as well as its connection to the season.

### **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON YOUR SEASONAL TABLE**

- When you create a seasonal table, you provide a special place for the natural objects that you and your children have gathered and collected from time spent in nature.
- When you create a seasonal table, you inspire your child to talk about what they have seen and liked when out in nature.
- When you create a seasonal table, you encourage and support your child's developing memory and ability to retell stories connected to the natural objects they have gathered. This supports later academic learning, as memory and storytelling are important skills to develop in the early years.
- When you create a seasonal table, you cultivate a family ritual that plays an important role as you build your family's story of joyful shared experiences in nature.

Your seasonal table should have a special place in your home where it's easily accessible by you and your child. Although there's no right or wrong way to create your seasonal table what's important is making it a beautiful focal point by keeping it simple and tidy. Choose a day in the week where you and your child tidy it up and see what needs to be returned to Mother Nature. On the same day – which could become your 'seasonal table walk day' – you can go on a walk to find new treasures. It can be a day when you sit by your seasonal table and read or tell a story or share memories. A seasonal table offers so much for creativity, engagement, bonding, communication, connection, learning, and care.