

God and Nature with Young Children

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¹The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display His craftsmanship. ²Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make Him known. ³They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. ⁴Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world. (Psalm 19:1-4,NLT).

Nature, in all of its beauty and splendor, is another venue created by God to proclaim His glory. God is not keeping His glory and His power a secret – He is making Himself known on a daily basis. In Psalm 19, David wrote about the closeness we feel to God in nature. He focused on the heavens and the skies – something seen by all people regardless of where they live. In the book of Romans, Paul shared a similar sentiment, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20, NIV).

God reveals Himself to *all* people in and through His creations – the natural world all around us. Young children are no exception and time spent with and in nature provides a platform for promoting a child’s spiritual development. “Children’s spiritual development is stimulated first by loving relationships and then through exploration of real, natural, and beautiful things” (Rivkin, 2014, p. 60). As early childhood professionals in a Christian environment, we have the incredible opportunity to connect the divine, orderly design of nature back to its Creator. We encourage this connection by letting children experience, explore, and investigate nature through intentional teaching with a keen understanding of early childhood development and developmentally appropriate practices which address all aspects of a child’s being, including spiritual.

Spirituality, a critical component of a child’s development, refers to a child’s innate curiosity about nature, the origin of things, and how he is related to others and the world around himself (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010). In order to be truly curious, to literally ponder nature and its origin, children simply need time to enjoy nature. This unstructured time lets children make focused observations and formulate theories which “encourage their openness to the wonder and joy of nature” (Benson & Miller, 2008, p. 22). Children ask questions and discover the answers with through their investigations, with the active support of a responsive adult. Parents and teachers learn through their observations of the children and the children’s questions, and then provide environments and opportunities “capable of filling children with wonder, awe, joy, and inner peace” (Rivkin, 2014, p. 65).

During these conversations of discovery, the magnificence of the world begins to make sense to a child as he connects the wonder to the Creator. These deep connections help a child move beyond himself as he develops characteristics like empathy and kindness (Rivkin, 2014). Because nature is an inherent conduit to children's deep connection to God, it is imperative that educators and parents provide children with positive encounters with nature.

Nature-based outdoor spaces are simply outdoor environments based on natural elements including items such as gardens, tree stumps, and logs (Rivkin, 2014). As with indoor spaces, careful thought and consideration to space usage must be given to outdoor environments. Children still need space to run around as well as space to create and explore with their tools from nature. Consider utilizing outdoor spaces to:

- Go on a "Creation Hunt" as you walk outside with the children letting them find God's many creations through their senses. Take pictures and make a "Creations Scrapbook" that can be added to throughout the year.
- Say a "thank you" to God for the many creations you notice outside.
- Create a "Butterfly Garden" (with child-safe plants) to help children learn about and then experience the life-cycle of butterflies. This leads to a discussion of God's great designs for all of life/creation.
- Create a quiet place with a "Prayer Bench". Use this area to help children understand and enjoy the quiet solitude we can have with God.
- Add an outdoor prop box to encourage play and exploration outside. Each discovery the children make gives them insight into God's power.
- Take musical instruments and praise God outside to help the children feel that closer connection to the Creator.
- Plant a garden and enjoy the harvest.

Helping children experience and enjoy nature opens a window that allows them to look more closely at the wonder of creation. By looking closer and digging deeper into the questions of why and how, children begin to connect more deeply to the one true answer: God. Nature is all around us and using this outdoor classroom to help children grow and develop emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually is an opportunity that should be seized by early childhood educators.

References

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