

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2011

Musings from Mud Day: A Joyful Conversation

Compiled by NACC Leadership Team members

International Mud Day, celebrated each year on June 29, began with a conversation between Bishnu Bhatta from Nepal and Gillian McAuliffe from Australia about how to help children all over the world experience the joys of mud, despite the inevitable challenges that this might bring.

The first International Mud Day was a huge success, and it has sparked a great deal of conversation among educators, families, and children about mud. We invite everyone everywhere to join the conversation!

Comments and questions about experiences with mud came from people around the world: New Zealand, Tanzania, Belize, the United States, Scotland, Fiji, Nepal, and Australia, to name a few:

- Mud Day brought freedom and joy to our children. How can we do this more often?
- In our part of the world, our parents were very worried about letting children get muddy. How can we help them want to try this experiment?
- Mud Day helped us as adults find our playful sides. How can we connect to this part of ourselves more frequently?
- It was valuable for our children to know that other children around the world were enjoying the same activity

at the same time. What are other ways to help children feel a 'connectedness' to others around the world?

- Thinking ahead to next year: How can we involve our families more in Mud Day?
- How can we involve our whole community in Mud Day?
- It was really cold in our part of the world on June 29 so it was hard to celebrate Mud Day then. Should there be two International Mud Days each year at different times for different climates?
- At first, many children were worried about immersing themselves in mud. Once they did, however, they felt really proud and joyful. How can we help our children safely 'push themselves' a little more as they explore nature?

People also sent in comments from the children about their experiences with mud:

- Mud changed me!
- This was the most fun I've had in my whole life.
- I can't believe my teacher got muddy!
- Mud felt better than I thought it would.
- My whole family got muddy.
- Can we do this a lot more?

As we consider the questions and comments listed here, we invite you

to click on the link for "Connecting the World's Children with Nature" Environmental Action Kit (available for free download at www.worldforumfoundation.org). There you'll find many ideas for other kinds of natural experiences that children can enjoy wherever they live in the world.

We also invite you to add your voices to the "Muddy Musings":

- Do you have thoughts about the questions posed above?
- Do you have insights to share from your own International Mud Day experience?

Please send these to Tara Hild, liaison to the Nature Action Collaborative for Children Leadership Team, at tarah@dimensionsfoundation.org. We'll try to include some of your thinking in upcoming editions of *Wonder*. Stay tuned!

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY BUSSEY



Bushwalk Playgroup — Under the Sky

by Vicki Kearney

Having become aware of the Nature of Forest Kindergarten model of child care a couple of years ago, I have been keen to find a way of working with children in nature myself. In the fourth term of last year, along with another mother, we took five children ages 3-5 years to the creek behind the Samford Valley Steiner School in Brisbane. Since our numbers have dwindled over the term, I wondered whether it would continue this year. A couple of weeks before first term commenced at the beginning of this year, I was contacted by a mother wanting to join Playgroup at my home. As both groups were full, I asked her if she would be interested in coming to the creek. And so began the Bushwalk Playgroup.

The Playgroup is in third term now; and we have four children (ages 3-4 years) coming along without their parents and another five children (ages 7 months-4 years) coming along with their parents. Mostly they are mums, but we do have a father and a grandfather. We also have little Ivy, a puppy who is a favourite with all the children!

All the children have their own little backpacks with their food and water, a change of clothing, and rain jacket. Most times the backpacks finish up in the trolley as the children love to run and explore without them on their backs. I, too, carry a backpack equipped with a basic first aid kit and extra children's clothing. I have also acquired a pair of sturdy work boots, ideal for exploring all kinds of terrain, and in the rainy season I prefer to wear cotton-lined gum boots. I also purchased a good quality rain jacket. I carry a mobile phone that is switched off and to be used only in an emergency. I also have a sturdy, reliable trolley that was made by my son. It is an essential item. The chassis is made from steel and it has four big pump-up tyres for comfort. We do give it

quite a workout, going over stones and ruts, up hills and over bumps. It also carries a lightweight tarp in case of rain, a towel, a pillow and blanket. Children with tired legs or not feeling so well also ride in the trolley.

At the creek, we have a couple of spots where swings have been hung and also a see-saw made from a tree trunk and large rock. Otherwise, nature is our toy. There is plenty to explore and generally we follow a set rhythm. The group gathers at 8:45 am and we finish at 11:30 am. By this time, the little ones are tired and ready for lunch and a nap. Not to mention me! (I, too, am still working on my own fitness level and find it quite tiring. But it is so much fun.) We have not missed a Playgroup day because of bad weather. We walk in the rain, we swim in the creek, we discover and explore. This term we changed our route and went to another part of the creek, which was warmer in these winter months. We love having the men along and the older people. One week we had a great-grandmother of 84 years join us.

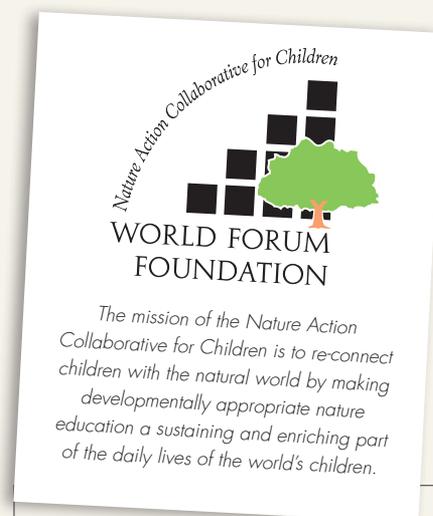
We always begin the morning with a welcome circle of a blessing, a little dance, and our poem. During the morning, we may play a couple of games at a certain spot, or we may not, depending on what is happening. At the completion of the morning, we end with a circle to bless Grandfather Sky and Grandmother Earth and a good-bye verse. Sometimes I feel like I could do more of this, but for now, it is enough.

Our group relationships are strengthening and I find the adults are conscious of not only their own children's needs, but also that of the other children. It is wonderful to witness. I have come to realise that it is the children who take us to the creek, not the other way around. I leave

you now with the poem, which is said with our hands crossed over our hearts before setting off on our adventures.

*Hurt no living thing
Ladybird, nor butterfly,
Nor moth with dusty wings,
Nor cricket chirping cheerily,
Nor grasshopper so light of leap,
Nor dancing gnat,
Nor beetle fat,
Nor harmless worms that creep.*
by Christina Rossetti

Vicki Kearney is keen to hear from others working with young children and nature. Her inspiration also comes from reading Helle Heckman's book, *Nokken: A Garden for Children*. She can be contacted via email Vicki@avenuesforchange.com.au.



Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

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One of the Five Elements of Nature: Fire

by Swati Popat Vats

In traditional Indian Hindu culture and texts, nature is described as having five elements: *Agni* (fire), *Jal* (water), *Vayu* (air), *Akash* (sky), and *Prithvi* (earth). These five elements each have a god that signifies it and all are revered, both culturally and religiously in the Hindu traditions.

Ayurveda, Yoga, and many such disciplines of alternative medicine believe that the human body is made of all five of these elements and they have to be maintained in their respective proportions for the health of mind, body, and soul. When the proportion of one or more of these elements is disturbed, stress, illness, and other related problems in the human body result.

In the Hindu tradition each of these five elements play a vital role in the celebration of festivals. For example, religious rites were always done sitting on the ground (*prithvi*) under the open sky (*akash, vayu*), and involved the invocation of god through fire (*Agni*) and water (*jal*). Of course in modern times many of these things have changed.

Culturally, many religious rites were closely associated with nurturing nature:

- Feeding cows and pigeons at the temple

- Feeding the crow to help the soul of the departed
- Tying a holy thread around the banyan tree and revering it
- Revering the holy rivers
- Always having fire in religious rituals
- Farmers revering the soil and the earth

There are festivals to signify the importance of the five elements. Here I focus on the natural element of fire. Fire plays a vital role in the lives of Hindus in the Indian tradition.

- To appease and pray to the gods, a small candle-like flame called a '*diya*' (a combination of cotton and oil) is lit everyday in homes, even more so during the Hindu festival of Diwali, The Festival of Lights.
- Hindu marriages are always conducted around a fire. The couple prays to the fire and then makes seven rounds of the fire.
- Hindu prayers ('*havan*') to appease the gods are also done with a fire.
- The dead are burned on a funeral pyre.

Two of my favorite festivals that involve fire in different forms are *Lohri* and *Sankranti*. *Lohri* is a festival of northern India and is celebrated on the 13th of January. It signifies the cutting of the harvest crop and is a time to celebrate the success of

plowing and harvesting the land and getting a successful crop that will mean food and happiness for the entire year. People, especially women, dance around a fire, wearing traditional clothes. Corn and ground nuts are roasted in the fire and shared by one and all, and children

go to neighbors' homes asking for '*lohri*' and may get either money, sweets, or gifts from each house.

Sankranti is a kite flying festival and is celebrated on the 14th of January every year. It is the windiest day of the year, and it is after this day that the days get longer and the nights shorter. On this day people of all ages fly kites from the roofs of the houses. This festival, though common all over India, is more prominent in the state of Gujarat. The most amazing sight is in the evening when 'fire kites' are flown.

These kites ('*kandils*') are made of paper and thin bamboo sticks. Little lit lamps ('*diyas*') are placed on each of these kites and then slowly the kites are let loose in the sky with a thin kite thread. As the first '*kandil*' glides up, a second '*kandil*' is tied on the same thread and let loose. Soon the sky is dotted by many such lights bobbing up and down in the sky. Flying these '*kandils*' takes a lot of patience, dexterity, and technique.

Little children always watch these '*kandils*' with awe wondering, "What if the lit lamps make the kite catch fire?" So they wait with bated breath to see how far and how many lamps can go on one thread and which lamps get blown out by the wind or fall down. Imagine how this activity connects children with all the elements of nature and the realization that nature, if nurtured, can work for us and not against us.

The natural element of fire — which signifies the sun — is revered and celebrated in the Indian Hindu tradition. Around the world in different cultures there may be many celebrations or stories related to fire. Let's share our experiences and our oneness with the elements of nature.

Swati Popat Vats is a member of the NACC Leadership Team for Asia.

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