

A Practitioner's Guide  
to  
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING  
**Connection to Nature**  
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For our first **Thursday Think Piece** we have a longer more informative blog from Jo Fitzpatrick- Learning Outdoors Development Officer here at Thrive Outdoors. This blog is a continuation on from Jo's [Tuesday Tips](#) on the same subject of 'Connection to Nature.'

## Connection to nature

'Connection to nature', is a phrase that is used quite a lot and one that you might have heard, but what is it and why is it important?

The term '**connection to nature**' has been described as an emotional affinity with nature<sup>1</sup> or "one's appreciation for, and understanding of, our interconnectedness with all other living things on the earth"<sup>2</sup> Ultimately it concerns the human-nature relationship and how strong that bond is.

The notion of unity and interconnectedness is not new to Early Childhood Education as it is a key tenet of the principles and pedagogy of Fredrich Froebel (1782-1852), founder of the Kindergarten movement.

So why is it important to nurture and encourage a connection to nature?

Well, there are many benefits of spending time in nature, with positive effects on both our mental and physical health. Research has shown how crucial nature experiences are for child development, and that social, emotional and cognitive benefits can be gained from spending time in nature<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Mayer & Frantz (2004) The connectedness to nature scale: A measure of individuals' feeling in community with nature.

<sup>2</sup> Nisbet, Zelenski & Murphy (2009). The nature relatedness scale: linking individuals' connection with nature to environmental concern and behavior

<sup>3</sup> Gill (2014) The Benefits of Children's Engagement with Nature: A Systematic Literature Review

Creating opportunities to connect with nature can have a long-term positive effect not just on human wellbeing but on environmental sustainability. Scotland was the first nation in the world to declare a state of climate emergency highlighting the need for urgent action.<sup>4</sup>

It's thought that childhood experiences in nature affect our relationship with the natural world and in turn how we feel about it and how we act in it. It has been linked to ecological behaviours in both children and adults.

*“No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced”*

-David Attenborough

Some Scottish research<sup>5</sup> identified key affective influences on the development of positive environmental behaviours, these included connection to nature, a sense of place and direct contact with nature.

Therefore local, outdoor learning and environmental education opportunities are ideal for learning in, about and through the natural environment.

## Knowledge and love

If young people don't value or feel connected to nature then they won't place an importance on taking care of it, so then where will the future stewards of the natural environment come from?

Knowing a fact doesn't always mean we act on it.

That is because it is how we *feel* (about the environment), our affective attitude, *along* with (environmental) knowledge that influences our actions and behaviours.

John Burroughs in his book *Field and Study*, wrote

*“knowledge without love does not stick; but if love comes first, knowledge is pretty sure to follow”.*

Research from the RSPB (2013), found that 4 out of 5 children in the UK are not connected to nature which if taken as an indicator of future environmental behaviour, could suggest a worrying statistic for the health and well-being of the environment.

## So, what do we do about it?

What opportunities do you offer for children to engage with nature, to learn about our inter-connectedness, to notice the natural environment, to pursue their curiosity, to inspire a love of nature?

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<sup>4</sup> Climate Emergency Response group: <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/Climate%20Emergency%20Statement.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Christie & Higgins (2012). The impact of outdoor learning experiences on attitudes to sustainability: a brief review of literature

I really like this figure below by Dr. Alexia Barrable, a Dundee based researcher. It shows the influencing factors relating to nature connectedness, wellbeing and Learning for Sustainability and how these connect to Early Childhood Goals.

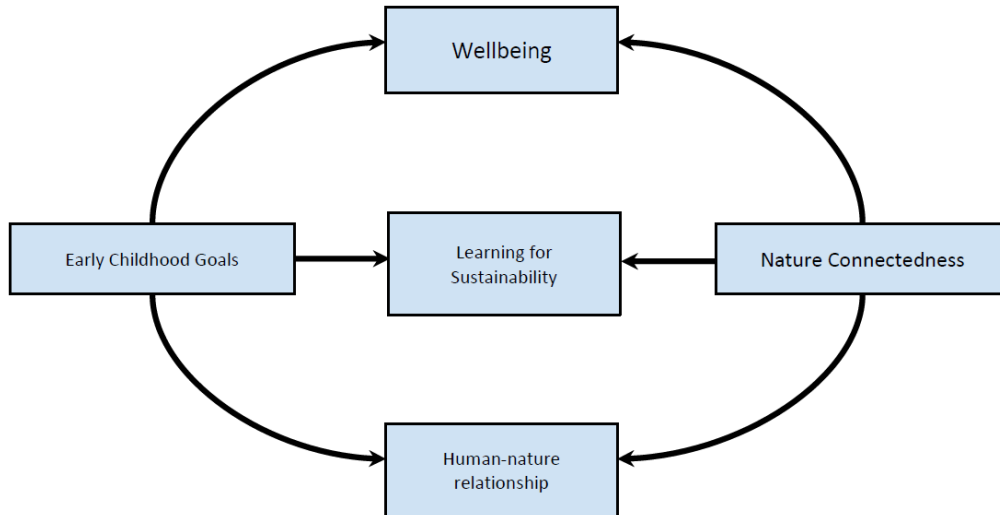


Figure 1. Relationship between Early Childhood Goals and Nature Connectedness.

Barrable (2019)<sup>6</sup>

Learning for Sustainability (LfS) is Scotland’s response in relation to promoting Education for Sustainable Development in schools.

### What is LfS ?

It encompasses sustainable development education, global citizenship and outdoor learning and aims to provide “motivational, relevant, challenging and creative learning experiences which engage learners and improve behaviour, attitudes and attainment” <sup>7</sup>

*“A whole school approach that enables the school and its wider community to build the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence needed to develop practices and take decisions which are compatible with a sustainable and equitable society”.*

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face including climate change and environmental degradation - check out the SDG #13 Climate change action ; #14 Life below water ; #15 Life on Land for more information on SDGs and how you can explore these in your setting.  
 To empower children to be heroic leaders for change read more here:  
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-action-superheroes/>

<sup>6</sup> Alexia Barrable (2019) The Case for Nature Connectedness as a Distinct Goal of Early Childhood Education

<sup>7</sup> One Planet Schools Working Group (2012): <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/One-planet-schools-report-learning-for-sustainability.pdf>

## Sense of wonder and awe

If you work with children you will have observed the curiosity and sense of awe and wonder that children have for the natural world. Carson (1956) believed that a child's sense of wonder is rooted in the emotions and allows them to discover the "joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in", but opportunities for these experiences are dwindling.

Modern lives are led increasingly indoors, either at home or school and with our reliance on devices, this means that often we/our children don't get to spend much time outdoors. This disconnection has been referred to as 'Nature Deficit Disorder' by Richard Louv, who has written about this in his books 'Last Child in the Woods' and 'Vitamin N'.

Outdoors, in nature, is where the passion for learning, creativity, and the inquisitive nature of children can be cultivated. Children can learn by doing and problem solve in an organic way, and it enables them to form and consolidate a connection to nature!

*"If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused - a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love - then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response."* Rachel Carson<sup>8</sup>

As children have an innate curiosity with the natural world, all they need is a willing adult to facilitate these experiences....

*"Children who spend all their time in the open air may still observe nothing of its beauties. The boy sees the significance but if he does not find the same awareness in adults the seed of knowledge just beginning to germinate is crushed"*<sup>9</sup> Fredrich Froebel

So what are some things you can do to help foster a Connection to Nature in the children you work with?

If you would like to read about how to incorporate these opportunities into your work then click [here](#) to read Jo's handy tips and activities on how to foster a connection to nature in children.

**Enjoy this blog? Would you like to continue the conversation?**

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**or by email to [amy@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:amy@inspiringscotland.org.uk)**

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Carson (1956) Help your child to wonder. Woman's home companion

<sup>9</sup> Froebel in Tovey (2007) Playing Outdoors. Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge

## Further Reading and Resources

Alexia Barrable (2019) The Case for Nature Connectedness as a Distinct Goal of Early Childhood Education

[https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33707799/8.\\_barrable\\_formatted\\_0.pdf](https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33707799/8._barrable_formatted_0.pdf)

Rachel Carson (1956) Help your child to wonder. Woman's home companion

<http://training.fws.gov/history/Documents/carsonwonder.pdf>

Louise Chawla (2015). Benefits of nature contact for children <https://bit.ly/3rtlg0b>

Children and Nature Network has lots of great resources:

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/resource-hub/resources/>

Learning for Sustainability Resources; Education Scotland

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/a-summary-of-learning-for-sustainability-resources>

Froebelian Approach to outdoor Play: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Outdoor-Play-Pamphlet.pdf>

John Muir Lost Words activities <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/initiatives/the-lost-words>

Lost Spells resources <https://www.thelostwords.org/resources/>

Project Wild Thing: <https://www.thewildnetwork.com/inspiration/project-wild-thing>

Sustainable Development Goals:

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-action-superheroes/>

Climate Emergency Response group: <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/Climate%20Emergency%20Statement.pdf>

One Planet Schools Working Group (2012):

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/One-planet-schools-report-learning-for-sustainability.pdf>