

# Trust, the Earth and Children: Birth to Three

by Mary Helen Young

The thought of playing outside evokes magical memories which include the sights, sounds, scents, textures, and emotions of the moment. My favorite outdoor memories include trees. I got a secure sheltered feeling when under a low canopy of soft green leaves or swishing pine needles. I indulged in the rich fantasy of elves, dwarfs, and fairies as I nestled into the tangled roots of the large trees in the park. Growing up on the coast in southern California I was blessed with abundant natural settings. The Earth and the gifts she offers continue to provide security; I seek trees when my spirit needs to refresh and recreate. These memories inspire me to promote natural outdoor environments for the children I have the honor of serving. I want to inspire an abiding trust of the earth. My goal is to encourage budding environmentalists. How does one encourage such profound respect for the Earth?

We seek to develop comfort, respect, and trust through the provision of a home-like environment in our centers. This succeeds when we sensitively and authentically include the cultures of all the families we serve. How do we create a home-like outside environment for the children and their families? Start with consistent, well-paid, educated, experienced, respected, and nurtured teachers. Create a strong foundation with quality teaching staff; they will create environments best suited for the group of children they are teaching in that moment. Next, consider the yards, parks, and outside play area of the children you serve, assuming they have access to such. What non-toxic herbs, spices, vegetables, and flowers are grown by the families you serve? Do the families you serve sit in hammocks, on the stoop, on towels, benches, or other outdoor furniture? Seek to incorporate family culture into the outdoor environment.

Consider the inside spaces that provide comfort and security to children. Trees, bushes, and plants can be used to define spaces and lower the ceiling. Create a quiet area in a circle of trees or bushes. Offer a toileting area under a shady tree with some privacy provided by bushes. Craft a low maze with slow and low growing bushes. Encircle a mud hole with water loving plants, leaving openings for children to merge into and emerge from. This could define a messy/science area where children may explore with water and all of nature's bounty. Add low up-ended logs, containers, and scoops; chil-

dren will do the rest. Sand play need only be enhanced with the addition of scoops, containers, and sometimes water. There are a variety of ways in which you might construct or plant a definition for this for the sand area.

Logs, stones, and rocks supply a natural variety of gross motor experiences while doubling as seats and visual enrichment. Espalier trees with low branches for children to climb upon, straddle, and incorporate into structures. When you take walks with the children, model your respect for the earth and the community by eliminating garbage as you walk. In one infant/toddler center, the children begin to call the plastic rings that hold six cans of beverages together, "the bird chokes." We regularly picked them up and cut them into pieces with an explanation for our behavior. We took garbage bags and gloves along with us on all of our walks.

Nature is the supreme provider of curriculum. From trees we receive shade, sounds, colors, textures, smells, and edibles. We receive leaves, needles, cones, acorns, nuts, flowers, and bark. For those of us on limited budgets the free *loose parts* are a welcome windfall. Trees shelter and nourish birds, squirrels, and insects while at the same time they endow us with free curriculum inspiration. Thoroughly investigate the toxicity, the allergen potential and the pest drawing and repelling qualities of each plant. It is preferable to plant flora indigenous to your locale.

Let me arouse your imagination with the story of a 15-month-old girl I observed investigating nature in the Infant Garden at the Center for Child and Family Studies of UC-Davis. She spends up to a half an hour collecting acorns, transporting



Mary Helen Young, MA, is the associate director of the Center for Child and Family Studies, Human, and Community Development at the University of California-Davis. She acknowledges past and present staff of the Coastside Infant/Toddler Center, the Palo Alto Infant/Toddler Center, and the Ellen Thacher Children's Center for the influence they have had on her understanding of children and development. One focus of her work at the Study Center is the construction of a preschool yard based on the principles stated in this article!