

# Planning intentionally for Children's Outdoor Environments: The Gift of Change

by Nancy Rosenow

When I was a child 50 years ago, nobody planned my outdoor environment. My home was close to flower-filled meadows that I could explore freely, and my preschool and elementary school classrooms opened onto beautiful woodlands that we children used as an important part of our day-to-day learning. The last time I visited my old school, I noticed with dismay that the meadows and woods were gone, replaced by high-rise apartment buildings and other signs of 'progress.' The outdoor spaces were now made of asphalt and plastic.

How easy it would be to fall into the trap of thinking that "everything was better back then." Certainly many things have changed for children since I was young, and undoubtedly some of the changes have been difficult ones. However, over the past ten years, as I've worked with people around the world who are interested in children's outdoor environments, I've come to understand that even the upsetting changes have pushed us in ways that have helped us discover new gifts. More on this in a moment.

First, the bad news. No doubt today's children are facing a host of daunting challenges that will take hard work to fix:

In 1995, Marion Wright Edelman described some of these challenges in her book, *Guide My Feet*:

"Never have we exposed children so early and relentlessly to cultural messages glamorizing violence, sex, possessions, alcohol and tobacco, with so few mediating influences from responsible adults."

She goes on to describe her sadness at the erosion of cultural values:

"No value has been left uncommercialized in a culture where planned obsolescence of consumer products keeps cash registers ringing, and plastic smiles, plastic cards, and plastic souls have lost touch with the genuine."

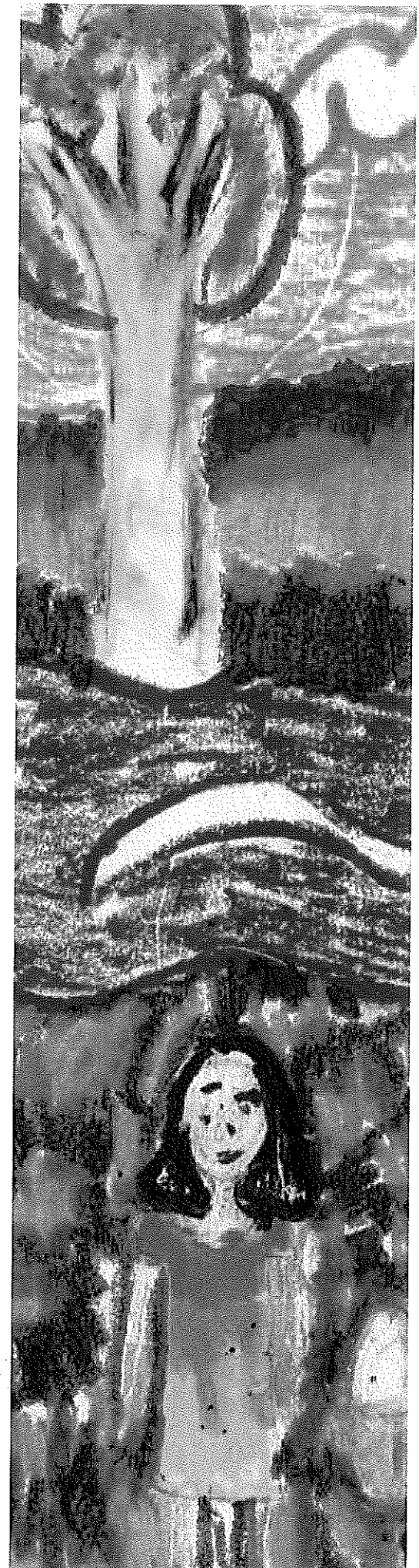
Many would say that things have only gotten worse since these words were written. The world today's children face has grown increasingly more commercialized than it was even when the first edition of *Exchange* was published.

n British Broadcasting Company correspondent John Berger (1990) writes: "In the cities in which we live, all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day of our lives. In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images."

n Po Bronson and Ashley Merriman, in their recent book, *NurtureShock* (2009), talk about the harmful effect that this



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over-abundance of media is having on children's health. They present new research that today's child sleeps at least an hour less every night than a generation ago. They write:

"There are many causes for this lost hour of sleep . . . lax bedtimes, televisions and cell phones in the bedroom." They assert that lost sleep contributes to "the international obesity epidemic and the rise of ADHD."

n Richard Louv, in his groundbreaking work, *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), describes the adverse effect electronic media is having on children's relationships with the natural world:

"For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear — to ignore. A recent television ad depicts a four-wheel-drive SUV racing along a breathtakingly beautiful mountain stream — while in the backseat two children watch a movie on a flip-down video screen, oblivious to the landscape and water beyond the windows."

So, yes, life has changed in the last 50 years. Our family had no television set when I was five years old, and my relationship with the natural world was a close and nurturing one. Today's five year old is likely to have a personal television set (and perhaps videogames and a cell phone) in her bedroom, but a dearth of nearby natural spaces to explore. It might be tempting to throw up our hands, despairing at the impossibility of changing things back to the way they were. However, some additional words from Marion Wright Edelman (1995) might show a better way: "So often we dwell on the things that seem impossible rather than on the things that are possible."

Now for some good news: many things are possible. It may be impossible to go

back to the 'good old days,' but there are many opportunities — gifts, really — that we adults can find as we work to address our children's challenges and usher in the 'good new days.'

One opportunity is to change the way we think about our relationship with the natural world, and about the way we plan for our children's outdoor environments. An unintended consequence for those of us who grew up with 'free-range childhoods' (where nature was ever-present and accessible) was that it became all too easy to take nature for granted. Why not change a woodland into a high-rise apartment? Aren't natural spaces a dime a dozen? Sadly, we've learned that the answer is no. We are beginning to realize that progress often comes with a steep price, and that not all new plans are good ones. This is a valuable lesson that will stand us in good stead moving forward, and one that's worth passing on to our children.

Playground designer Rusty Keeler (2008) wrote that his realization of what was changing in the world caused him to make a major career shift:

"I thought about the children growing up today and how they, too, need the opportunity to play in the natural world. It was then I decided to break away from the play equipment industry and work on my own to create children's environments filled with nature and art, built with the love and support of families and communities."

Others around the world were coming to similar realizations. Adults began raising awareness of the importance of making sure connections with the natural world were again part of our children's daily lives:

n Claire Warden in Scotland began writing about her Forest Kindergartens.

n Toni and Robin Christie in New Zealand began speaking about their work to create nature-filled outdoor spaces that honor individual cultures and settings.

n Landscape architect Helle Nebelong's work in Denmark began demonstrating the exciting possibilities for designing nature-based play spaces in community playgrounds and parks.

n In the United States, many others, such as designer Robin Moore and educators Stephen Kellert and Ruth Wilson, were also making their voices heard.

n Landscape architect, Jim Wike, sold his traditional practice to work with the Nature Explore program, a collaboration between an environmental organization and a research foundation that brings natural space designs and educator workshops to diverse settings where children spend their days. In his book, *Learning With Nature* (Cuppens, Rosenow, & Wike, 2007), Jim writes:

"The most wonderfully designed natural outdoor classroom will only be as effective for children as the adults who explore it with them. . . . Educators and families who encourage children to master new challenges, develop increasingly complex skills, and closely observe and appreciate the natural world will give children gifts that will last for a lifetime."

n Child Educational Center near Pasadena, California, began holding state-wide workshops to encourage educators to embrace the idea of the outdoor classroom as a place for daily learning and discovery.

n The staff at Boulder Journey School in Colorado were reviving the ideas of David and Frances Hawkins, who encouraged 'environmental education' in the most holistic sense of the word. In the 1970s, noted educator Frances Hawkins

(1997), who along with her husband, mathematician, philosopher and educator, David, founded the Mountain View Center for Environmental Education, wrote these wise words:

"We must provide for children those kinds of environments which elicit their interests and talents and which deepen their engagement in practice and thought. An environment of 'loving' adults who are themselves alienated from the world around them is an educational vacuum."

Many others, far too numerous to mention here, but all important to the effort, began to voice the need for nature-child connections. And, this is what is remarkable: People from all over the world and from multiple professions began talking to each other — face to face — and through e-mail (one of the gifts of change) about our children's future. No longer were individual, isolated geographic areas making separate, disconnected decisions and discoveries about what our children's outside spaces in our schools and communities might look like. Conversations were happening and information was being shared. A comprehensive and collaborative effort from the World Forum Foundation's Nature Action Collaborative for Children's international leadership team resulted in a set of "Universal Principles for Connecting the World's Children with Nature" ([www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature)). These ideas will help guide designers and educators for years to come. The cooperation it took to find common ground on this effort is an example of what human beings can accomplish when individual egos are set aside in pursuit of a transcendent goal.

So, with a nod to Marion Wright Edelman, let's focus not on what we can't do, but on what we've learned we can do to make the world a better place for children through their outdoor

environments. Here are some of these 'can do' steps:

- n We can work to ensure that every outdoor environment used by children will become a nature-filled, joyful space.
- n We can help children truly notice and appreciate the wonders of the natural world.
- n We can create and use outdoor spaces in ways that are right for each unique setting.
- n We can encourage children to experience managed risk and challenge.
- n We can spread the word that children learn in valuable ways in nature-filled outdoor spaces just as much as they do indoors.

The changes in our world have caused us to stop and think more intentionally about what children's relationship with outdoor environments can and should be. Along the way, we've made some valuable discoveries. In her article, "The Seeds of Learning," researcher Dana Miller (2007) writes:

"The outdoors provides an arena where children can communicate what they know in a very different way than they might in a traditional classroom. . . . With teacher support, the outdoors becomes a safe place to express positive emotions and learn to process and manage negative emotions. Children learn courage and confidence and how to successfully interact with others as they explore the wonders of nature together."

Environmental writer Gary Paul Nabhan (2003), in an article called "Listening to the Other," says that teaching children to love the natural world where they live, and helping them understand the interconnectedness of all living systems, might be a powerful

motivator for avoiding the ravages of wars that displace humans and disrupt nature. He asserts that:

"Every war we avoid allows millions to remain in place, and keeps the vibrant places of the Earth from being dismembered. It is the healing power of the land and our shared history with it that offers hope of a brighter future."

Scientist and therapist Joan Borysenko (1990), who writes about the connection between emotions and health, describes what happens when children (and adults) spend time in nature: "The peaceful, loving quality of life's source floods through our connection to the moment. . . . And when we connect to this inner wellspring, we feel all of life so much more strongly."

Our children's growing disconnection from the wisdom of nature has been a wake-up call for all of us. If it has caused us to stop and remember to honor our relationship with the Earth and never take it for granted again, then that is a powerful, life-enhancing gift indeed.

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