



Jolie D. McHenry and Kathy J. Buerk

## Infants and Toddlers Meet the Natural World

AS EDUCATORS WHO CARE FOR AND TEACH INFANTS, we realize the value of bringing nature into the classroom and the youngest children in touch with nature. Children observe, listen, feel, taste, and take apart while exploring everything in their environment (Seefeldt 2005, 53). Teachers can cultivate nature investigations with very young children by offering infants natural objects they can explore and investigate. Here are some images and examples from our program.

### Investigation of leaves

In our area of the country, during autumn, leaves are changing colors and falling. What an interesting investigation for babies. While taking walks we first explored leaves in their natural environment, then brought them into the classroom for the children to look at closely and carefully. The infants appeared interested in feeling the veins of the leaves and discovering the various shapes and textures. We covered some of the leaves in contact paper so the children could explore the veins of the leaves without crumbling them. We also offered natural leaves for infants to explore and crumble under our guidance.



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### Investigation of bok choy

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Bringing cultural diversity into the classroom is a necessary component in our everyday discoveries with infants and their families. In the vegetable aisle of our local grocery store we noticed bok choy, a variety of cabbage with white stems and dark green leaves commonly used in Chinese cooking. We purchased a large head of bok choy and took it back to our program. The young investigators enjoyed touching and smelling the stalks and smiled when they saw its large green leaves. We cooked some and tasted it. (Be sure to get parents' written permission before serving new foods to babies.)

### Investigation of pinecones

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We take our children on walks each day to study the natural world around us. We saw that the infants were paying attention to pinecones lying on the ground. In response, we collected cones of different shapes and sizes so the infants could compare and contrast these natural items. We believe that children are born natural scientists who are curious and ready to learn. Even in infancy, children compare and contrast objects as they explore their world.





## **Nature and language development**

Explorations of nature present wonderful opportunities to introduce language and literacy. By providing real objects, we help infants associate words with the concrete objects they represent. According to Carol Seefeldt, “Through projects or investigations children become acquainted with words new to them and incorporate these into their vocabulary” (Seefeldt 2005, 79).

Teachers must support and incorporate language development throughout all aspects of early learning. We introduce the children to the foundations of biology by taking nature walks. Practitioners describe the features of the earth and the creatures that inhabit it. While on a walk, we noticed a frog sitting on a rock. What a great opportunity to introduce new vocabulary and increase early language development. Our role is to facilitate children’s thinking and learning as they discover meaningful experiences (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller 1999, 20).



## Adding a fish tank

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Tropical fish lend a living natural element to the infant classroom. By using a fish tank, practitioners can safely model how to care for animals. This is the basis for introducing children to ecology. A stimulating learning environment engage's children's curiosity about the world around them. In our classroom, an aquarium sits on the floor behind a room divider with a Plexiglas window. This allows the babies to observe the aquarium safely and independently. Alternatively, the fish tank can be placed in a wooden box with the front removed and replaced with Plexiglas.



In conclusion, by providing natural materials for infants to study and explore, we believe we are creating the path for lifelong learning. When adults introduce nature in the earliest stages of development, children will be open to new ideas and skills. Learning through nature can provide children with hands-on experiences, leading to a greater understanding of our dependence on the earth's physical environment. They will be able to carry these skills with them throughout their lifetime. Nature provides opportunities for children to grow in all areas of their development.

## References

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- Jablon, J., A. Dombro, & M. Dichtelmiller. 1999. *The power of observation*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies.
- Seefeldt, C. 2005. *How to work with standards in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.



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