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Outdoor experiences

*The learning potential of the natural world has been at the heart of Montessori practice since its earliest days, explains **Barbara Isaacs**...*

LONG BEFORE THE FOREST SCHOOL approach was introduced in the UK and before the British government provided capital investment for early years settings to develop outdoor classrooms, Montessori advocated “bringing the inside out and the outside in”. This idea was aimed at providing connections between observations of nature and opportunities to learn about plants and animals found in the immediate environment of the nursery. As early as 1911 Montessori devoted a whole chapter to this topic in her first book *The Montessori Method*, later revised (with the chapter in question significantly re-written) as *The Discovery of the Child*, published after World War II.

In this chapter, entitled ‘Nature in Education’, Montessori refers to her inspiration, Jean Itard, who studied the behaviour and development of the Wild Boy of Aveyron (the subject of Francois Truffaut’s 1970s film *The Wild Child*). The boy was abandoned as a baby in the forest and brought up by wolves. When this feral child was discovered at the age of seven and brought to Paris, Itard observed his very unique relationship with the outdoors. He loved storms and wind, and when the snow fell he ran outside, rolled in it and ate it. Montessori was much taken by this story and researched further, referring in her chapter to the work of British-born Mrs Latter, who recommended education based on gardening and horticulture. This idea was developed further by Baccelli in Paris who advocated “little educative gardens” within the confines of special schools. Each little plot would be prepared and sewn with different botanical variety, giving the children an opportunity to learn how to care for and nurture a variety of shrubs and flowers. The idea was that they learned gardening skills, which they could use to earn a living later in life.



Developing practice

This research helped Montessori formulate her own ideas about the importance of experiences of nature stating that “the best way of invigorating a child is to immerse him in nature”. Further on in the chapter she writes “it is also necessary... to place the soul of the child in contact with creation, in order that he may lay up for himself a treasure from the directly educating forces of living nature”. In her unique language Montessori advocates the need for the real experiences so firmly embedded in good early years practice of today.

Montessori organises her ideas about children’s need for contact with the outdoor environment into several principles, which are paraphrased below
The child:

- is initiated into observation of the phenomena of life;
- is initiated into the life of plants and

animals in his/her care and realises that they are directly dependent on his/her care for them;

- is initiated into virtue of patience and into confident expectation, which is a form of faith and of philosophy of life;
- is inspired by the feeling for nature and finally follows the natural way of development of the human race.

Whilst some of these ideas may seem a little strange, Montessori schools continued, where possible, to have little plots of land that the children could cultivate and take responsibility for. This started first in the Children’s House in Rome, whilst in the nursery in Milan, children had an opportunity to care for a pair of pigeons and delighted one day when young fledglings hatched. Today most Montessori nursery and primary schools keep a pet and grow their own flowers and vegetables. Children enjoy caring for them and also harvesting and cooking and eating their own produce.

I often ask students to reflect on their earliest memories when we begin to explore learning in the area of Understanding the World. It is not surprising that many come up with sensory experiences of nature, such as seeing a rainbow for the first time, experiencing a summer storm, seeing the first snow, walking by the sea and collecting shells or jumping into piles of leaves in the garden. I would like to invite you to ponder your own early experience and the importance of having contact with nature in your own life today.

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