

Future stewards? Connection to nature starts from childhood experiences in nature areas

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Introduction

These days, more than half of the world population is packed into cities and this trend is still ongoing. Urbanization, however, is an ongoing force separating humans from the natural environment. This limited access to nature results in less direct contact with nature. Some researchers even warn for the “extinction of experience”, arguing that due to the loss of interaction with nature, interpreted as outdoor activities in nature, positive attitudes towards nature protection, emotions and pro-environmental behaviour will decline. As environmentalism is often traced back to memorable childhood experiences in nature, one may wonder what would happen if children would not have those experiences anymore. The disconnection between children and the natural world has left author Richard Louv, and many more with him, to wonder where the future stewards of this earth will come from. Recently, several interventions aimed at reconnecting children with nature, through real life nature experiences, have been initiated. Examples of these interventions are: the greening of children’s playing environment at nurseries, school and during leisure time and the introduction of nature experience programs for primary school children. The aim of this research is to investigate the connection of nature

Connection to nature

Based upon Cheng and Monroe (2012) and Giusti et al. (2014: 21) we define nature connection as the feelings and thoughts in and about nature leading towards an empathic concern for nature, an awareness of human dependency on natural resources and consequently a moral obligation to respect and protect nature. It consists of the following dimensions (i) *feelings in nature*, referring to the affective component while experiencing nature, (ii) *empathy with creatures*, referring to the ability to understand and share feelings of another, (iii) *sense of oneness*, which is about people’s place in nature and the importance of nature in people’s lives, and (iv) *sense of responsibility*, which focuses on the moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of nature (Postma, 2016; Schouten-Van der Laan, 2017).

Experiencing natural playgrounds and nature after school centres

Children’s connection to nature has been the subject of two studies in the Netherlands, one focusing on children playing in two natural playgrounds called “De Natureluur” and “Het Woeste Westen” in Amsterdam and one focusing on nature after school centres “Struin” in Nijmegen and “Wijs” in Utrecht. The research consisted of extensive participant observation, (group)interviews with approximately 60 children (age 5-11), and –in the case of the nature after school centres- questionnaires with parents.

Results

All children enjoy playing in nature, though the level of enjoyment depends on the extent children feel comfortable in (types of) nature. Children show much empathy for creatures and perceive plants and animals to be largely equal to human beings. The majority considers humans to be part of nature and recognize human dependency on nature and natural resources. Knowledge plays a strong role in the sense of oneness children experience. Finally, sense of responsibility seems to differentiate with respect to the other connection to nature variables. In case of a positive enjoyment of nature sense of responsibility was articulated from an anthropocentric point of view, with respect the loving and understanding of other living creatures a biocentric value was attached to it and when discussing sense of oneness a ecocentric interpretation was given to sense of responsibility (see Figure 1). The results indicate that the strength of connection to nature depends on influential adults, such as parents, staff and warders, whether playing activities were spontaneous or organized in children clubs, and whether the playing environment afforded only natural elements or also man-made elements.

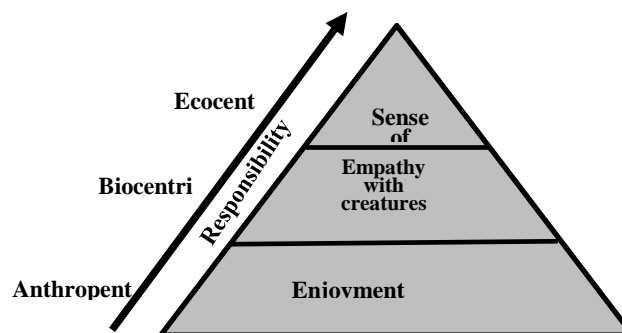


Figure 1. Connection with nature conceptualized

A “children experiencing nature” inclusive policy

Our research shows that connection of nature is stimulated by means of experiencing nature in both natural playground and nature after school centres. A basic requirement for it is that children need to feel comfortable in nature. Especially sense of responsibility can be increased by knowledge about human beings relationship with creatures and dependency on nature and natural processes. Finally, connection with nature can be increased by influential adults who help children focus as well as to create understanding of nature and natural processes. Our results seems to indicate to experiencing nature during childhood might contribute to the creation of future environmental stewards. Therefore, nature policy should be “nature experience” inclusive, especially, but not exclusively, for children.

References

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