

Nature and Urban Living

By Ramya Sridhar

Introduction

All of us are leading busy lives at this time of lockdown. With no help at home, we are managing our work online and simultaneously taking care of our homes. There is cleaning, washing, folding, cooking and numerous other household chores to take care of. There is also pressure from work, deadlines to meet, phone calls to attend. Many of us are already planning a holiday in our minds. A place to go to once the lockdown is lifted and life goes back to normalcy. We think of holiday and our minds envision a place with mountains, rivers, valleys. We think of going to a sea side resort where we can stare into the ocean and find peace. There are many holiday destinations that advertise themselves as holiday retreats, their captions reading, 'Come find yourselves in nature'. Why is it that being close to nature is the most desired holiday? When we are very close to nature, we have a sense of peace within us. We feel quiet and calm. All the problems seem to dissipate and we feel healed from all the wounds afflicted upon our souls by the everyday stress.

But what happens when we are back from the holiday? We get back into our routine and soon begin planning for the next holiday. Let us ask ourselves a few questions. Is nature really a place where there are no humans or very less population? Is it true that only if we plan a holiday and get away we can be with nature? Are only mountains, rivers, sea and forests nature? Is it possible to bring the beach or the mountain or the river into our homes?

Child's need for Nature

Let us think consider the urban lives that we lead. We are familiar with the term concrete jungle. When we turn around and look, there are tall buildings everywhere. We have built walls of glass and bricks and cement around us. We enter our homes and get busy with our routine. We buy our vegetables online. There are malls that take us away from reality and time when we enter. Let us look outside our homes for a moment. There is the sky, there are trees, wild plants or shrubs, cats, dogs and cows walking by and birds that fly around us. All these are aspects of nature. Nature is all around us. It is just that we fail to notice them as we go about our busy lives. We have to remember that our children need to live with nature. It is important that they feel connected to the natural environment around

them. It is the role of the adults around children to establish this connection with the world. Only we can provide opportunities for our children to understand and appreciate the beauty and harmony of the natural elements around them.

Nature around us

When we look out of our windows, we can see the vast sky above us. We rarely take time to look at the sky. It is out there, a constant presence and yet it is different from moment to moment. Let us think of the sun rise. When we wake up a little earlier than usual, find a space in the balcony or terrace and watch the sky as the sun begins to appear. The colours of the sky change, gradually. Initially it will be dark. Then gradually a light yellow light begins to appear in the horizon. The scattered rays to light yellow to orange shades can be seen across the sky. Slowly we can see an orange ball emerge. It is not blinding to the eyes but rather pleasant. Before we know, it is blindingly bright. The sun rises every day and yet if we observe we realise that it is a different scene each day. The array of colours that are constantly offered to us and the hues that are painted across the sky constantly change. Watching this glorious phenomenon connects us to something deep inside our souls. It leaves us inspired and touched. When we have our children with us during such experiences, they imbibe the joy and wonder that we feel when we are amidst nature.

We also know of the existence of the clouds. If we notice, on a sunny day, we can see the white puffy clouds that float on the vast blue sky. The light clouds move fast and change shape as they move. It is a beautiful sight. On a rainy day, the clouds are darker and heavier. They move at a slower pace. For young children it is a great experience to just be there and watch what is happening. These are contacts that we are establishing between the natural world and our children. To be just an observer and watch and enjoy the whole spectacle is participating in life itself. Providing such experiences make their lives richer. Later, when we read to them a poem about clouds or the sky, they have something to relate to and enjoy, or when they come across a painting or photograph with clouds or a sunset, it carries more meaning to them.

Let us think of the birds that live around us. We are all familiar with the crows. Many apartments have pigeons. If we look out of our window or balcony, we can see a row of birds sitting on the electric wires. Many of us do not know the names of many common birds that we come across, like Drongo, Mynah or Sparrow. If we listen carefully, we can hear their calls. In the current situation, when there is less traffic on the roads, we can hear

the birds clearly. Each of these birds has a distinct call. We can look for the names of birds around us watch them with our children. We can try to identify their calls, learn with our children if we do not already know about it. We can also help our children to proactively participate in caring for the birds. If possible we can tie a small bowl to our window grill and fill it with water every day. We can enable our children to do this. Then we can see birds coming to drink the water. We are helping our children come closely in contact with nature here. Birds will begin to drink water regularly at a particular time. This gives us an opportunity to observe them closely.

Child's responsibility towards Nature

What we are setting up here is not just a routine, we are helping the child to be responsible for another living being. To feel responsible for another living being is something we associate with adult hood. But we can sow the seeds here for the young child. To nurture another life from early on increases their feelings of self-worth. It brings about the compassionate side of our children. Children are naturally compassionate. They care for others and love what is around them unconditionally. We are giving them opportunity to express that compassion to not just fellow humans but to all forms of life. We are bringing them close to the natural world.

We can take our children for little walks around our homes. Many times when we walk out, we have an agenda. We have to go to a shop or get a bus or a cab. Or we go for a brisk walk for fitness. We walk past the trees, shrubs or plants that are growing on the road side. Those of us who go for a walk with a young child will know what they see. For young children everything is new. They look at the world with awe and wonder. They like to stand and watch things. Montessori says children are keen observers of nature. When we walk at their pace, they like to observe the insects, plants and other living beings. They may notice things that we may never have seen before.

We think that to expose our children to animals we need to take him to a zoo. A cow that is grazing or a dog that is playing or lying down, the cat that lies down on the compound wall are all a part of the animal kingdom. But, what do we do when there is a dog on the road. Many of us tell our children not to go near the animals on the road. We instill the fear in our children about the dogs in the road or the insects in plants. Many of us are scared of these ourselves, as this fear was instilled in us at a young age. Why should we pass it on to our children? Think of what our reaction is when we see a lizard on the wall. We scream, or quickly call someone and try to shoo it away. We must remember that we are passing on the fear to our little one also. The lizard is not there to harm us. He is doing his ecological task. To

not be afraid of other animals and watch them is necessary to feel that compassion towards another living being.

In one of her books Montessori cites a story of a little girl in a farm. Montessori was feeding a goat. The goat was trying to go on his hind legs and take what Montessori was offering. He fell back a few times in the effort. This girl who was watching this came running and supported the goat's fore legs so that the goat could comfortably eat what was offered. All children are capable of displaying such acts of kindness spontaneously. Even if we cannot feed animals or have a farm at home, we can have a container of water outside our homes for the passing by animals to drink from. Our children can be responsible of filling the container every day. It is not necessary that we need to have a huge space around our home to help our children get contact with the world of plants. Having small potted plants at home is a nice way of introducing our children to the world of plants. Plants are an affirmation of life. Growing plants is a way to acknowledge that. My friend, who lives in a small apartment with only one balcony near the kitchen, uses the small plastic yoghurt container to grow small plants and seeds. The container goes up on the wall. Every morning they come down and the child waters them all. This is a routine they have set up for themselves. Along with this, a sense of responsibility is inculcated. To feel responsible to nurture another living being is an opportunity we can offer that little child. The beauty with routine is that it is difficult only for the first few days. We have to remember and do the task. After a while, our children will remind us and nag us till it is done.

Healing Nature

When we are surrounded by nature, all our senses are at work. Nature provides us with a multi sensorial experience. Let us take the example of a rainy day. The smell of rain touching the soil, the humid sensation we feel on our skin, then the sounds of rain pouring down is a feast for all our senses. The joy of nature can be felt by our entire being.

Most of our children have experienced rainfall, but helping them be mindful of the happenings will aid them to marvel at the beauty surrounding them at all point. This will inspire them to be better and more responsible towards the world they live in. Qualities like kindness, tenderness are inherent in all living beings, but by establishing such simple routines with the child will encourage them to put it in practice.

This is important, for they will understand the idea of an ecological system without reading biology extensively. They will be led to understand that

they are just one part of this vast universe. It inculcates basic belief that the planet is not our property. Earth will exist beyond us; we are the temporary visitors. Helping them to develop an intimacy with nature, love and compassion for all living being around them will foster personal growth in the long run.

Creating these connections is not so that our child becomes a flag-bearing nature activist (although that could be a by-product) but so that they have a feeling of belonging, and adapt to the world with love and freedom, and not exist as a prisoner in fear of the world that is their home.



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This article is based on a webinar organised by the Indian Montessori Foundation presented by Ramya Sridhar on Saturday, May 30, 2020. Below are answers provided by the author to some of the questions raised by participants.

Question: How can we help children who are afraid of animal and insects? How can we help them to be kind to all living beings?

Answer: Many times children pick up our reactions unconsciously. Our reactions are passed on to children even when we do not intend to. So the first step in helping children starts with us. When we become aware of our fears or dislike, we can work on overcoming it. We can read or try to gain more information about the creature. An understanding of the insect or animal reduces our irrational fear for them. Becoming aware of our fear or dislike will also help us to consciously not react to the creature in front of children. Children are naturally kind beings. We can allow them to interact with animals around our homes without fear. We can set up a bird feed and help our children independently manage it. Even if we do not have the opportunity to grow plants in our homes, we can water the plants outside our compounds regularly. We can plant saplings around our building and care for them. When we give children opportunities for such interactions, we can see acts of spontaneous kindness from them.

Question: A situation may arise that a teacher has to be cruel or kill an animal (scorpion, rat). How to handle such a situation?

Answer: If a classroom is situated in a place where wild animals or dangerous creatures could enter the class then safety protocols should be in place. The teacher should know what to do if there is a rat or a scorpion. All the children should also be prepared. They should know about the creature's life as well as what to do if they see one. Knowledge creates safety. If there is any dangerous situation the teacher must first be calm and make sure that the children move away according to a plan. All adults should have their own role. The safety of children is of primary concern. Then dealing with the situation can also go according to the plan that has been set up. If this is a one-off situation then only calmness will help the teachers first deal with the safety of all children.

Question: How can we educate older children and get them interested in plants and animals?

Answer: As children grow, they begin exploring their environment not just with their senses but also become more curious to know why certain things happen and how they happen. As children grow, their curiosity also grows. We can provide factual books about the animals, plants and insects to satisfy their curiosity. There are many wonderful documentaries about animal life and plant life that we can watch with children. We can discuss what they saw with the children too. Telling them about the food chain or food web will help them to understand the survival mechanism of the animal kingdom. Stories will support their experience. We need to focus on the interrelatedness of all living beings and how all beings are dependent on each other for survival. The older child will soon realise that every living organism has a vital role to play in the functioning of the universe.

Question: Can you recommend any books on nature for children? Are there any Indian books for children about animals and birds?

Answer: There are many books. You can explore the catalogue of the National Book Trust. The Bombay Natural History Society also publishes wonderful books. Some books I would recommend for every family:

- Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Richard Grimmet, Oxford University Press
- The book of Indian Birds by Bulbul Sharma, Indus Publications
- Nature Rambles by Mohan V. Chunkath

- Indian Garden Flowers by Amarjeeth Singh, Prakash India Book Publishers
- The Nest by Brian Wildsmith, Oxford University Press
- Experiencing Nature with Young Children by Alice Sterling Honig, NAEYC Publication
- Follow the Ants by Amrutha Satish, Tulika Publications
- Who ate all that up? By Sejal Mehta, Pratham books