

Sensory Ecology in Ecoplay

Sensory ecology is the study of how humans interact with, and respond to, information from their environment. As we interact with the natural world, we change it, and it changes us. In recent years we have learned that spending time in nature can actually change the structure of your brain for the better (Bratmana et al, 2015). Spending time in nature makes changes in your brain that include increased cognitive ability, better focus and attention, and reduced instances of mental illnesses. When engaging in Ecoplay with your child, you can reap these healing mental and physical benefits by experiencing nature together.

If you have the opportunity to access a forest or other type of wilderness area, try the following exercises. This will bring your child into a state of mindful awareness through the skills of observing, describing and participating in the present moment.

Go out into the wilderness with your child. If possible, get far enough away from civilization that you can experience the natural area without the sounds of mechanical devices like automobile engines, cell phones, or any other mechanical devices. Find a comfortable place to sit with your child, and have him/her close their eyes. After sitting quietly for a few seconds, ask your child to name at least three things they hear. Next, ask them to open their eyes and name three things they see. It might help to ask them to imagine themselves as artists about to draw or paint what they see. If you have the time and the availability, you may actually wish to bring art supplies and allow them to paint or draw a scene from the environment around you.

Next ask them to name three things that they smell. It may help them to close their eyes to better focus on the aromas of the space. Move on next to textures and sensations. Ask them to describe three things they feel. If they like, they might experiment with different textures like the bark of a tree or a blade of grass, or a handful of soil.

Finally, if you have brought any snacks with you, ask them to place a bit of food on their tongue and describe the texture and flavor to you. Tell them not to immediately chew it up and swallow it, but to allow it to sit on the tongue for a while so they can get the full flavor and enjoyment. If you can offer your child a wild berry or other fruit from a plant in the environment, then it will make this exercise even more meaningful; however, use caution! Don't allow your child to eat anything in the woods unless you're absolutely certain that it is a fruit that is safe and not poisonous. Also be mindful of any allergies your child might have.

When doing this sensory ecology exercise, don't be concerned if your child can't name three things for each of the senses. The goal is to focus attention on experiencing the wilderness space for what it is with your senses, and as long as your child is doing that, the number of sensations she/he notices isn't important.

The purpose of this sensory ecology exercise is twofold. The first goal is to allow your child to experience the forest with all their senses. The second is to bring your child into a mindful state of awareness in the present moment. Why the present moment? Think about the times you have been stressed out or depressed. What were you thinking at the time? How many of those stressful or depressing thoughts had to do with past or future events? How many of those thoughts had anything to do with the present moment?

When we're thinking about the future or the past we're living in our heads in the "mind trap." Our minds have tricked us into ignoring the present moment. But if we focus on what our senses are telling us, we are focusing on the present. That's because we cannot hear, taste, smell, see or feel anything in the past or future. We can only experience with our senses in the present moment. When we are in present moment awareness, we are no longer focusing on past regrets or anxiety about the future. Life happens in the present, not in our heads!

The original meaning of the word "sacred" meant, "That which is set apart." Ecoplay is all about experiencing nature with your child in the present moment. The skills of Ecoplay create a "sacred space" for you and your child by setting apart a play time in a natural environment in the present moment.

Bratmana, G. N., et al (2015). Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of America* 2015. www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1510459112