The Value of Environmental Experiences for Young Children
By Deborah McLain, Mae C Jemison Elementary, Detroit Public School

Most children benefit from being outdoors. They like to see what is going on. They enjoy watching traffic, watching construction, clouds moving and birds soaring across the sky. They experience the sensory qualities of the world, the smells, the feels, and the sounds. They enjoy the space in which they can shout, climb, and jump. Being outdoors stimulates brain development. Young children need the wide experienced that being outdoors provides.

For years kindergarteners have taken field trips to the zoo and to the farm so that they may read, draw, talk, and learn about pumpkins, cows, gardens, bears, monkeys and lions. Despite the benefits of outdoor experiences, children spend most of their time inside. Adults fears regarding firearms, kidnapping and injury leads them to keep children indoors, especially in many urban areas where there is limited places and space for children to play and explore.

How early should environmental education begin? It should begin as early as possible. Life long experiences begin as soon as babies walk with independence.

Young children learn about the environment by interacting with it. Many young children are at risk of never developing positive attitudes and feelings toward the natural environment. Some children never achieve a healthy degree of familiarity with their environment. Children who are close to nature relate to it without any inhabitation. They view the environment as a source of wonder and joy. What is read in books become real and more personal.

Environmental education during the early years should be based on the sense and joy of discovery. When provided with frequent positive outdoor experiences they become familiar and comfortable within their world.

If space is limited we can take an ordinary space and transform it into an environmental yard. Students can add bird readers, wind socks, flowers and vegetable gardens rock piles, and other natural elements. So they take part in ownership, they desire more and more participation.

Young children learn through discovery and self-initiated activities, we as adults and educators serve as facilitators. Our own sense of wonder, more than our scientific knowledge will spark a child’s love of nature. Our feelings about our environment are more important than facts when introducing young children to the world of nature. Young children often develop an emotional attachment to what is familiar and comfortable to them.

Early experiences with the natural world develop imagination and a sense of wonder. Wonder is important, as it is a motivator for life long learning. Natural elements provide for open-ended play and unstructured exploration with many materials such as sand, soil, rock, plants worms insects and others. A variety of out-of-school settings have been effective for developing environmental knowledge and concepts. They have also been effective in teaching an awareness of environmental problems.

Nothing can replace the sensory moment when a child’s attention is captured by a butterfly fluttering or birds chirping. All the manmade swings and man-made playscapes cannot substitute for the hands-on experiences between nature and child. Naturalized outdoor playspaces are nech learning environments for children of all ages. Outdoor areas lend themselves to meeting the children’s individual need. Discovery offers children chances to manipulate the environment, to explore, to wonder and to pretend, the natural environment is as magical as the world of Disney and the World of Discovery.