



Why it is so good to take people, especially children and youth, to nature!

According to a study in Germany, 80 % of all young people enjoy spending time in nature. The same study states:

- for 83 % of all of them it is relaxing to be in nature.
- 62 % think nature is the best place to be at, if you would like to relax.
- 42 % think nature is the best place to be at, if you would like to think about something important.

Probably in other European countries the results would be similar.

Psychiatrist and biologist Prof. Gebhardt from Hamburg presented on a seminar some years ago:

Why being in nature is so good for us humans.

Prof. Gebhardt explained:

We humans live in a constant dilemma.

On the one hand:

We always want to experience something new.

We are looking for variety in life.

On the other hand:

We wish to have routine and consistency.



That means, we do want two things at the same time, but they don't go together.

But that's exactly what we can find in nature,

Gebhardt explained. Imagine you have a favorite tree, not far from your home. Maybe like the one on the picture. Every now and then you sit down under this old tree. You may have done this already 30 years ago.

It is always the same tree. The tree has hardly changed during the last 30 years. But every time you sit under the same tree, you experience something different. Sometimes a bird sings sitting in the tree, sometimes insects buzz around you or leaves rustle in the wind. According to Prof. Gebhardt, this is the secret why we can relax so well in nature. **Our favorite tree combines both of our desires, variety and continuity.** As the study quoted above shows, even children know that spending time in nature is good for us.



The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche knew another reason why we do like to spend time in nature. Ones he said: **“We like to be in nature so much - because nature does not have any opinion about us.”**

And it is true, if you take a walk through the forest, no tree will check how you are dressed and if you are in a good mood or not, behaving well. They just do not care and you can feel free and relax.

Some great thinker even were sure that spending time in nature makes better people out of us:

The philosopher **Emanuel Kant**, born 1724 for example wrote: *“By absorption into nature the development of the moral of human beings can be raised.”* Because the beauty and the mystic of nature makes the ones who really pay attention to it more humble. And this humbleness makes people in general, Kant was sure, more sensitive, thankful and respectful.

The Dakota – Native American **Luther Standing Bear** (1868 – 1939) said:

“The old Dakota knew, that the heart of a person, who lost the connection to nature, will become harsh. They knew, that the missing respect for everything that is alive and everything that grows, will also lose respect to people. That why the influence of nature, who made young people tactful, is part of our education.”

Researches do show:

From the people who in general like to spend time in nature, just one third of them also likes to get to know something about the nature itself during their time in nature. The motivation of the majority is just to use nature as a kind of setting for their picnic, jogging, mountain-biking etc. And indeed, many of us know very little about the natural world around us.



In Germany 3228 kids in the age of 10 – 13 years were shown pictures of the 12 most known birds that we can see often every day in our gardens. 1% of the asked children knew all of them, 8 % non of them, in average the kids managed to name 4 of the 12 different birds.

But not just knowledge is missing, also the experience.

Just one third of all kids in the age from 12 – 15 in Germany had ever a butterfly or a beetle on his or her hand. Just half of all asked children remembered a nice moment in nature.

That is where Nature Education comes in. The goal is to make people interested in nature, to connect them with nature and to show them nature's beauty.

The aim should not be to teach the people we take out into nature as much as possible. It's not about being able to name six tree species afterwards. The aim should be that the participants of our activities afterwards

- find trees fascinating
- have learned something about the magnificent life of these giants

If they also know the name of a tree, that's good too, of course.

But studies have shown:

It is not the knowledge about nature that makes us behave more environmentally friendly, it is the emotional connection that matters. Creating this emotional connection to nature is the goal of nature education.

The old slogan of the environmental movement „You are just willing to protect what you know“ is not really correct. Better would be to say: „You are willing to protect what you love!“

But how to create an activity that connects people with nature?

How to start, if you are going with a group into nature?

If you go with people, especially children or youth, into the nature I would like to suggest you the following steps to open up their mind and heart to their surrounding and to make them curious about nature.

STAGE 1: The Beginning - Awaken Enthusiasm

- Through a game
- A story that leads into the topic or introduces the area in
- A surprising beginning that makes the participants curious about what will follow during the program
- Create an atmosphere as you would go on a journey or adventure together, entering another world, being guests in this “new” world

STAGE 2: Focus Attention

- Through a game
- A story
- A treasure or letter that you find “unintentional” that gives a task to the group
- Becoming active by themselves, alone or in a team
- A meditation
- Focusing on something, an object, a tree and connecting it to a story
- A song that you do sing together
- A poem
- A task that should be fulfilled during the activity

STAGE 3: Direct Experience

Don't talk too much or explain everything before.

Try to make it possible that the participants have a direct experience, that they discover something on their “own”

Try to arrange the first task in a way that the participants...

- know quickly what to do
- are excited and curious
- are getting surprised during fulfilling the task
- are becoming active by themselves, alone or in a team
- are becoming creative and use their own imagination



Stage 4: Share Inspiration & Experiences

Also if everybody did the same at the same place and at the same time, everybody still has different experiences and noticed different things, where focusing on different aspects.

Come together during such a program and share the inspiration and experience.

Often it happens that participants just understand and notice their experiences & emotions, when they have to talk about them and listening to what the others have to say. Create a nice setting for this sharing, a special place. Create a story around it. Maybe use a talking stick that goes from person to person.



Stage 5: Putting the experience into a bigger frame

Explain how things are connected in nature, how human beings are influencing the balance of nature. If the participants became interested, you have the chance also to explain more complicated things. We invite you to use the indigenous method of **coyote teaching**. The idea of coyote teaching is: *Don't tell the participants how something is. Give them good questions and some information that will help them to find the Solution by themselves*

STAGE 6: A nice ending

Think in before about a nice ending of your program. It could be a little ceremony, including a final talking circle, singing together a song, saying good bye to the place you visited.

You can also include a little evaluation:

What did I like the most? What did I learn?

What surprised me?

Magic Moments

Let's say you have three hours with your group in a forest. Don't try to fill the entire three hours with a "substantial" program. You can also let the children play for two hours in the woods. Something that is also valuable. You use the remaining time for your program after the children have had their fill. Your goal should not be quantity but quality. Try to create a "magic moment" that connects the participants with the forest, through a game, an exercise, perhaps a story.



Story telling in Outdoor-Education

Important for a successful story-telling situation is, to create first the right atmosphere. A good place is important, that everybody can sit/feel comfortable. Than create an atmosphere of curiosity. Maybe it is the story of a little seed that falls down from a tree in autumn.

If you tell this story in autumn and there are lots of dry leaves covering the forest ground, I recommend that the participants lie down on the soft, fragrant leaves. The braver ones can also



cover themselves with leaves so that only their heads are sticking out. All participants look up into the treetops and you ask whether everyone is lying comfortably and whether the story can begin. Everyone is allowed to rustle once more and then it should be completely quiet on the count of three. One, two, three ...

“It's autumn, small seeds have grown on the trees in the last few weeks, lots of seeds, lots and lots of seeds. They are now hanging on small stalks on the tree. They sway back and forth in the wind and one after the other they fall down, sail slowly to the ground and land on the soft forest floor. Now imagine you are one of those little seeds.

First you are just lying on the ground, nothing is happening. It is even a bit boring. Later on you are getting covered by some leaves that were also falling from the huge tree next to you. You are lying under the leaves all winter. It is dark and

you are closing your eyes. It is becoming colder and colder, it is wet. It is winter. Not much to hear. It is most of the time just silent. At least the leaves are coving and protecting you. That helps you to survive. After weeks and weeks you notice that something is changing. It is becoming warmer, nearly day by day. The ground starts to smell nice and some birds are waking you up in the morning with their beautiful songs.

*You get curious and want to see what's suddenly going on above you. Why it's getting warmer. But you're still in this skin. In winter it was quite practical, like a sleeping bag, but now it's annoying. You pull and wriggle, stretch and stretch.” You ask your participants.
‘You can all do that now, stretch so you can be free.’*



Finally the pod around you, opens. Slowly you are starting to grow, you wriggle past the leaves and then for the first time in your life you see the sun. (Now ask the participants to open their eyes. Now they do have the same view like a little seed on lying on the ground of the forest.) Isn't it good to feel the sun on your skin. Luckily, the trees above you are not yet leafy and the sun is shining right down on you. Mhh, it's good how the sun warms you after the long cold and damp winter that you spent under the wet leaves.

Wow, this gives you some extra energy and you are now growing even faster. You decide, you want to grow and grow, to become a big and huge tree”

This, for example, can be a magic moment. Perhaps your participants will see the tree seeds, the small tree shoots and even the big old trees with different eyes from now on.

What are our goals?

What do we want, what can we reach with our activities?

Our goal is that the participants of the project

- are getting emotionally more connected to nature
 - are having a good time and afterwards good memories about their time in nature
 - become more interested in nature
 - do know more about the nature
 - do know more about how things are related to another in the nature
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- get an understanding how human beings are influencing on nature
 - understand, that nature is valuable because of itself not just because it is useful for us
 - use their wits in a different way than usually they do
 - spend some time in nature and this way without Smartphones, TV and Gameboys
 - especially adults are watching at nature like kids do
 - play in nature and are getting animated to play like kids do
 - are spending time at a quiet and peaceful place
 - are losing their fear against deep forests, spiders and other animals
 - like to go again into the nature
 - get a better understanding of their environment
 - get to know more about your home area
 - have fun
 - are spending a good time with others, interacting with others
 - to become curious



Notable things before you take a group of kids into nature:

Nature-experience-days with children in the nature

This checklist isn't complete and is meant to be extended with your own ideas and needs.

Locality:

- Do I know the terrain where the activity will take place? If not: When do I take the time to visit it before taking kids there?
- Are there dangerous points in the terrain and how do we deal with them?
- Is there a need of arranging something concerning the use of the terrain in before, e.g. do we need a permission?



- Is there a place to stay for bad weather (barn, hut, ...) reachable
- Are there toilets reachable – or if not how to deal with the need?
- Is there a clear meeting point which is easy to find for the kids and their parents?
- Are there any nature protection laws to follow during the activity? What is allowed and not allowed? (Make fire, leaving the paths, pluck plants, collect mushrooms & berries, go fishing ...)
- Is there a nice place for breaks, meetings, story-telling and talking circles? Such a place can also be chosen and created with the participants.



Parents:

- Are all parents informed about the time scale, the aims & activities of the project?
- Are the parents informed about the dealing with ticks and other risks?
- Do I or another responsible person have the telephone number of the parents for emergencies so they can be contacted?
- Can the parents contact us during the activity?
- Are the parents informed what the kids should bring (food, drinks, etc.) and maybe dress?
- Do the parents have filled out and signed a „transfer of parental responsibility“?

During this activity:

- When will the kids be informed about the rules? (already before or at the location?). It's important to test if all kids have understood the rules. You could also develop the rules together with the participants.
- Is it clear for the participants in which area of the terrain they can move freely?
- Is it an idea to mark the borders for example with red cloth rag, so the kids do know up to where it is allowed to go?
- Is there a sound-signal (howling like a wolf for example) to gather everybody at the meeting point that everybody knows?
- Take garbage bags for your own trash and maybe even found garbage with you.
- Reserve time for the ideas of the kids and free play.



Team:

- Do we have enough people in our team, even if someone from the team needs to go with a participant to a doctor, the toilet etc.?
- Can the team be contacted by phone e.g. by the parents?
- Has somebody a first aid box with him and does somebody has first aid knowledge?
- Are all teamers informed about the program and who is having what duties?
- Is there a list for the materials that you bring, also to control their completeness in the end?
- Do you want to document the project? If yes, who photographs and who writes a report?
Have the parents given their agreement for photographing their children and maybe publishing the photos?
- Take your time afterwards to evaluate your activity and your team-work?
- Reward yourselves, go out to eat together etc.

I hope this article has motivated and inspired you to go into nature with people, especially children and youth. There's hardly anything better you can do. Maybe it sounds complicated with all the phases and instructions. Actually, that's not the case; you probably do a lot of things automatically. Experience and common sense alone are almost enough to spend a great time in nature with others.

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