

# Network News

*e-Newsletter of the  
VA Infant & Toddler Specialist Network*

Issue 3

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## *Exploring the Wonder of Nature Infants and Toddlers Meet the Natural World*

*by Jolie D. McHenry and Kathy J. Buerk  
from NAEYC Beyond the Journal, Young  
Children on the Web, January 2008*

As educators who care for and teach infants, we realize the value of bringing nature into the classroom and the youngest children in touch with nature. Children observe, listen, feel, taste, and take apart while exploring everything in their environment (Seefeldt 2005, 53). Teachers can cultivate nature investigations with very young children by offering infants natural objects they can explore and investigate. Here are some examples from our program.

### [Investigation of leaves](#)

In our area of the country, during autumn, leaves are changing colors and falling. What an interesting investigation for babies. While taking walks we first explored leaves in their natural environment, then brought them into the classroom for the children to look at closely and carefully. The infants appeared interested in feeling the veins of the leaves and discovering the various shapes and textures. We covered some of the leaves in contact paper so the children could explore the veins of the leaves without crumbling them. We also offered natural leaves for infants to explore and crumble under our guidance.

### [Investigation of bok choy](#)

Bringing cultural diversity into the classroom is a necessary component in our everyday discoveries with infants and their families. In the vegetable aisle of our local grocery store we noticed bok choy, a variety of cabbage with white stems and dark green leaves commonly used in Chinese cooking. We purchased a large head of bok choy and took it back to our program. The young investigators enjoyed touching and smelling the stalks and smiled when they saw its large green leaves. We cooked some and tasted it. (Be sure to get parents' written permission before serving new foods to babies.)

### [Investigation of pinecones](#)

We take our children on walks each day to study the natural world around us. We saw that the infants were paying attention to pinecones lying on the ground. In response, we collected cones of different shapes and sizes so the infants could compare and contrast these natural items. We believe that children are born natural scientists who are curious and ready to learn. Even in infancy, children compare and contrast objects as they explore their world.

### [Nature and language development](#)

Explorations of nature present wonderful opportunities to introduce language and literacy. By providing real objects, we help infants associate words with the concrete objects they represent. According to Carol Seefeldt, "Through projects or investigations children become acquainted with words new to them and incorporate these into their vocabulary" (Seefeldt 2005, 79). Teachers must support and incorporate language development throughout all aspects of early learning. We introduce the children to the foundations of biology by taking nature walks. Practitioners describe the features of the earth and the creatures that inhabit it. While on a walk, we noticed a frog sitting on a rock. What a great opportunity to introduce new vocabulary and increase early language development. Our role is to facilitate children's thinking and learning as they discover meaningful experiences (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller 1999, 20).

### [Adding a fish tank](#)

Tropical fish lend a living natural element to the infant classroom. By using a fish tank, practitioners can safely model how to care for animals. This is the basis for introducing children to ecology. A stimulating learning environment engages children's curiosity about the world around them. In our classroom, an aquarium sits on the floor

behind a room divider with a Plexiglas window. This allows the babies to observe the aquarium safely and independently. Alternatively, the fish tank can be placed in a wooden box with the front removed and replaced with Plexiglas.

In conclusion, by providing natural materials for infants to study and explore, we believe we are creating the path for lifelong learning. When adults introduce nature in the earliest stages of development, children will be open to new ideas and skills. Learning through nature can provide children with hands-on experiences, leading to a greater understanding of our dependence on the earth's physical environment. They will be able to carry these skills with them throughout their lifetime. Nature provides opportunities for children to grow in all areas of their development.

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## *UPCOMING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY*

**Webinar:** Allergy Awareness in  
Infant & Toddler Settings

*Thursday, October 11, 2012  
1:00 - 2:00 pm*

*During this webinar, participants will review the definitions of food allergy and food intolerance; determine common food allergies and symptoms of an allergic reaction and food intolerance; understand their responsibility in the diagnosis of a food allergy or intolerance; learn effective strategies for managing food allergies and intolerances; and gain information about how to read food labels. The webinar will be facilitated by VA ITSN Northern region infant and toddler specialists, Julie Renne, Helen Webster, and Debbie Weigand; and Kamini Jassal, Child Care*

*Specialist, Office for Children,  
Community Education and Provider  
Services, Fairfax County.*

*The webinar is free. [Click here](#) for more  
information and to download a  
registration form.*

## **RESOURCES SPOTLIGHT ON:**

Nearly half of the infant crib deaths and two-thirds of bassinet deaths reported to CPSC each year are suffocations from a baby being placed on top of pillows and thick quilts or because of overcrowding in baby's sleep environment.

- Always place baby on back to sleep
- Use a crib that meets current CPSC standards
- Keep pillows, quilts, comforters and cushions out of baby's crib, bassinet or play yard
- Use a firm, tight-fitting mattress
- Positioning devices are unnecessary and can be deadly
- For warmth, dress baby in footed pajamas

English resource: <http://www.cpsc.gov/nsn/bareisbest.pdf>

Spanish resource: <http://www.cpsc.gov/nsn/bareisbestsp.pdf>

## ***DID YOU KNOW . . .***

The National Association for Education of Young Children has launched a new website for parents and families, [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org) including an interesting article by Julia Luckenbill, [13 Things Babies Learn When We Read with Them](#). Here are a few key points:

- Reading time is a time when I am held and loved
- Every time we read I hear how words are used, listen to rich language, and learn new words
- Things come in different colors, sizes, and shape

- It's fun to play with language, and explore rhythm, rhyme and humor
- When I do something, another thing happens; if I point at a picture, my mom or dad will tell me its name. If I drop the book, we might stop reading
- I love books and one day I will love to read on my own

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