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# Lessons Nature Has Taught Us During the Pandemic

by Julie Bookwalter and Veronika Vicqueneau

**I**n the soft November light, a group of young children are enthusiastically looking for geodes and other precious rocks in the dry creek bed.

*"I found one! Look at this!" exclaims one, holding a black shiny rock up to the sky.*

*"Wow! Is it a real one?" asks another. "What type of rock is that?"*

*Without waiting for a response, they all excitedly resume their search.*

It has been two months since we returned to work in person, and our outdoor classroom has been a peaceful haven during the COVID-19 pandemic. After a bumpy first few weeks, we all adapted surprisingly quickly to our new program's life and rhythm, helping 15 children accomplish their daily school tasks while staying six feet apart and wearing masks. After 39 Zoom meetings a day, online independent work and additional homework assignments, it became clear that the only thing we all wanted to do was spend the rest of our time

outside. "Can I go outside?" was the automatic query as soon as there was a break in the virtual school day. Nature magically connected all of us back to her, as if she sensed that this was just what we needed in order to heal.

## Reclaiming the Land

Our dry creek bed has become the epicenter of our outdoor environment. The big rocks of the creek bed provide some children the experience of jumping from one rock to another. For another group, it has become a gold mine and a place to search for rare rocks, and for others it is just a place to spend time together. Some of our younger children wanted their own outdoor space to escape to, and we spent time building



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Veronika Vicqueneau holds a master's degree in human development from Pacific Oaks College and a certificate in positive psychology. She serves as the curriculum coordinator for the University of Irvine California-Irvine Child Care Services and is the lead teacher at the UCI Extended Day Center. Vicqueneau is also an adjunct faculty member at Irvine Valley College. She conducts professional development workshops on outdoor classrooms, mindfulness and anti-bias curriculum.



*Sycamore Creek, a magical place in our outdoor classroom.*

three lean-to shelters out of long branches and camouflage netting.

The children's need for nesting unveiled right before of our eyes and illustrated one of the most basic of Maslow's needs: safety. It was interesting to observe children personalizing and decorating their "cabins," and for the first two weeks back, many children retreated into their cabin at lunch time, enjoying the solitude of their new space. At the same time, some children were literally bathing in the mud area, reminding all of us of the therapeutic effects of mud (known in the adult world as balneotherapy).

### Caring for Living Things

As the children learned how to socialize in new ways, they found joy in cleaning the overgrown garden beds, turning the dirt and preparing and planting mud seed balls. Other caring activities took place, too. First, a praying mantis visiting the garden beds sparked questions and thoughts about what life would be like for insects in the winter, and some children decided to create a bug hotel. A large wooden box serving as the foundation was filled up with natural collected materials such as bark, pinecones, and moss which were carefully arranged in layers in order to be inviting to insects.



*The bug hotel built by the children.*



*The tree that taught us about grit.*

Inspired by this kind gesture, two children decided to build a bird nest out of twigs, mud and leaves. Finally, bird feeders were made from pinecones, sun butter and birdseed, to the grand delight of our gourmet squirrels and rodents—we are not sure if the birds were actually able to enjoy any of them! A kindergartner who helped a teacher re-pot plants asked if he could have one for his cabin. "I will take a good care of it," said the child as he triumphantly carried the plant to his cabin. And he has. These caring activities illustrated the hypothesis of biophilia for us, which literally means "love of life" and involves having a deep connection to other living things.

### Maintaining Hope

As self-healing occurred by reconnecting with nature, there was another lesson to be learned. There is a small citrus tree that stands alone in a pot near our garden beds. For several years it was spindly and yellowish and never grew much. Before the pandemic we almost pulled it out and replanted something else in its place, but in the end, we let it be. To our amazement and for the first time, when we returned to the center after six months, the small tree was heavy with fruit!

And just like that, nature took the lead, washed away fear and anxiety and reconciled us with humanity. That little tree taught us GRIT! As for our 15 children, they taught us that everything is possible. We can play, socialize, laugh, care and develop deep connections even during these uncertain times. "Out of difficulties grow miracles," wrote Jean de la Bruyere, and we think it is no coincidence that exactly 15 tangerines will soon be harvested from our tree.

