

HEALING LANDSCAPES

PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF NATURE TO CHILDREN

By April Bruning

“Shhh, be very quiet,” I whispered to the four young boys around me. We crept through the meadow glancing towards the dark woods beyond. A creature emerged, silent and calm. Just as we had hoped to see, a beautiful and harmless deer. Gracefully she pranced to a grazing spot for her evening meal.

At this moment one child turned to me with fear in his eyes, quivering, “If we get any closer will it attack us?” I realized that these boys, each coming from disturbed homes, were genuinely frightened by this docile creature, perhaps because brutality was all they knew.

While working as a horticulture therapist at a residential treatment center in New York, I became intrigued by the influence of the environment on human psychology. Watching the often depressed, frustrated, and angry faces of the boys transform into awestruck expressions of excitement at the first signs of life emerging from a seed they planted, or at the thrill of discovering the first ripe tomato in their vegetable garden,

exemplifies how the environment can have a beneficial effect on individuals. The boys, struggling to gain a sense of stability in the world around them, were able to gain a sense of purpose as they learned to nurture life and create beauty in the landscape.

The after-school work therapy program at the treatment center consisted of five different job sites, one of which was the greenhouse. The goals of the program were to instill in the residents a sense of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to follow directions, concentration on specific tasks, and group cooperation. The greenhouse site met and surpassed these goals. Through direct involvement with nature, the boys benefited psychologically.

Within the protective greenhouse bubble, we grew plants from seeds, bulbs, cuttings, clippings, and other propagation techniques. We then used these plants for a variety of projects. One project was planting a vegetable garden outside the greenhouse, so that the boys could nurture, observe, and then harvest their own crops. One crop of particular interest was the corn. The boys were amazed at how tall the stalks could grow, and they were anxious to taste the produce. However, when a hungry raccoon discovered the corn, the boys eagerly worked together to protect their garden. Throughout the gardening process, the boys also learned about other invaders and inhabitants, the insects. Initially the boys assumed that all bugs were detrimental and should be destroyed. After learning about the crucial roles each member of the garden played in the ecosystem, they gained a greater respect for all levels of life. They quickly realized that these important lessons about protecting and preserving life around them related to their own lives.

At the greenhouse we also grew flowering plants that we used to both enhance the residential grounds and create items to sell. The boys loaded the wheelbarrows with plants, tools, and equipment and went out into the residential grounds to add a

little color to existing flower beds, or build new ones. Or, the boys would fill their carts with springtime gift baskets that they planted with hyacinths or daffodils to sell to each cottage. Through these activities the boys contributed to their community and developed a sense of accomplishment, pride in their work, and greater self-esteem.

Once a week we left the greenhouse and ventured down to the pond or into the woods to explore nature. Most of the boys, being from the inner city, had little if any previous opportunity to investigate the natural world. These adventures into nature sometimes turned into treasure hunts—a quest to gather materials such as rocks or branches—to use in our garden projects. It amazed me to see how much calmer the boys became when I took them for one of these walks, away from the confines of any walls. Some of the boys were fascinated with the tadpoles and the unfurling of the fiddlehead ferns, while others took turns skipping rocks across the water surface. The boys became attentive and full of life while observing their surroundings.

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The greenhouse and nearby natural environment became sanctuaries for the boys, places to create, nurture, and watch the beauty of life grow and change. It is clear that the environment has a great impact on human beings and their understanding of the delicate web of life. Not only did the boys acquire job skills and an appreciation for their environment, they also found an outlet to relieve stress from their turbulent lives and a means to cope with their own psychological issues. The exposure to nature can be instrumental in healing the weakened mind, body, and soul. Through these mentally, physically, and spiritually damaged boys, I witnessed the powerful healing benefits of our natural environment. ■

April Bruning is a landscape designer with Copley Wolff Design Group, Landscape Architects and Planners in Boston, Massachusetts.