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# The Power of Nature: Developing Prosocial Behavior Toward Nature and Peers Through Nature-Based Activities

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## The Power of Nature: Developing Prosocial Behavior Toward Nature and Peers Through Nature-Based Activities

**Ibrahim Acar and Julia Torquati**

Photos courtesy of Julia Torquati

**Preschoolers Amelia and Nathan discover a mole hole. As they begin to explore it, teacher Mary gently cautions them, “Now we have to be very careful around this mole hole. Be careful not to step on it. We don’t want to hurt anything that the animal made.” The children move back from the hole but continue to observe it.**

**T**HE INTERACTION DESCRIBED ABOVE illustrates how an early childhood teacher nurtures children’s perspective taking and respect for another living thing—in this case, a mole. These interactions happen daily at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center (SANC) Preschool in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Experiences like this promote children’s development of prosocial behavior, consistent with the *Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence* (NAAEE 2010). This article examines the research question, How can teachers nurture the development of prosocial behavior for preschool-aged children through nature-based play and activities?

To address this question, five researchers (including the second author) conducted 74 running record observations of children’s behavior and social interactions over the course of two years. Of the children observed—many of whom attended the preschool during both years of the study—50 were also interviewed about their thoughts and feelings about nature.

The following sections provide an overview of the program in which the observations were conducted, review literature on the development of prosocial behavior through peer interactions and play, and present descriptions of seven themes of prosocial behavior demonstrated by children that emerged from analysis of the observational data: (1) respecting nature; (2) respecting people; (3) sharing, helping, and taking turns; (4) building friendships and expressing unity; (5) cooperating and working together as a team; (6) demonstrating empathy; and (7) expressing gratitude. Examples of practices the SANC Preschool teachers used to support each of these prosocial behaviors are presented along with suggestions for practices that educators can use in early childhood programs regardless

of their setting. Additionally, examples for children with disabilities are presented in some themes. (See “Children’s Prosocial Behavior Development Toward Nature and Peers Through Nature— Child Interactions,” page 66–67.)

### Program overview

The SANC Preschool provides extended experiences in natural settings and supports children’s development of empathy and prosocial behavior toward peers and nature. The preschool is located in a 185-acre nature center that features prairie, hardwood forests, ponds, and lakeshore. When the children arrive at the nature center in the morning, they meet their teacher and classmates in one of three outdoor play areas—the woods, the gardens, or the cabin. Fences enclose all of the outdoor play areas, providing gathering places for children to explore natural materials such as plants, sticks, soil, and stones.

Each of the classes is named for a type of bird that lives at the center—Chickadees, Cardinals, and Goldfinches. Children know the songs of these birds and can readily identify them. The children spend the first half hour of the session exploring and playing in the outdoor area. The group then gathers for circle time, during which teachers introduce the concepts they will focus on that day—for example, chlorophyll and changing leaves, what animals do in the autumn, whether the tree sap is presently running, or where turtles go in the winter. Teachers often share a story or a song about the concept with the children and then give the children a *provocation*, or question to spark curiosity. Provocation refers to educational strategies used by teachers such as providing unique or unusual materials and asking open-ended questions to prompt children’s learning (Strong-Wilson & Ellis 2007) and to focus their attention on the concept during a hike. For example, teachers may ask children to find leaves that have lost their chlorophyll, look for signs that sap may be running in the trees, or locate a wet, shady place where skunk cabbage might grow. Hikes typically take 45 minutes to an hour. Teachers facilitate both structured and unstructured nature experiences during outdoor time and hikes.

### Peer interactions through play in nature

Development of prosocial behavior is influenced by many factors throughout early childhood, including individual characteristics, environmental influences and experiences, and interactions with other people and the world

(Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg define prosocial behavior as “actions that are intended to aid or benefit another person or group of people without the actor’s anticipation of external rewards” (1977, 3). One factor that influences children’s development of prosocial behavior is peer interaction during pretend play, which offers many opportunities for negotiating roles, sharing, and perspective taking. Children can develop prosocial behavior toward human beings and toward other living things, such as plants or animals. Interactions with nature—especially with plants and animals—can influence children’s development of prosocial behavior (Cheng & Monroe 2012). Preschool-age children are capable of protecting and caring for living things in nature, especially with teacher support (Torquati & Barber 2005; Torquati et al. 2011).

Kahn (1997) proposes that children can develop empathy toward both nature and people, and that empathy in one domain can generalize to another domain. This conceptualization suggests that as children demonstrate prosocial behaviors such as caring and empathy toward animals and plants, their understanding of the perspectives, needs, and feelings of people can deepen as well. Conversely, when children can imagine the perspective of a friend, their perspective-taking ability can become generalized to enable them to understand why a bird or other small animal might be frightened when children approach it quickly or loudly.

## Interactions with nature—especially with plants and animals—can influence children’s development of prosocial behavior.

### Play and the development of children’s prosocial behavior

Play is a primary mode for learning about the world (Lee et al. 2009; Singer et al. 2009; Milteer & Ginsburg 2012). Children can practice problem solving and social skills, such as sharing, taking turns, and cooperating with peers and adults, through pretend play (Singer et al. 2009). Mutual play among peers cultivates perspective-taking and empathy for others, which provide a fundamental base of skills for establishing and maintaining friendships throughout a child’s lifespan (Brown 2009).

Different types of play environments afford different developmental opportunities. For example, traditional

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playgrounds with primarily human-made structures emphasize physical and motor development but do not offer the diversity of opportunities to learn about the natural world that natural environments do (Mahidin & Maulen 2012). There is a movement in preschools, however, toward more natural outdoor play areas, as such settings provide many opportunities for children to develop their sensory and observational skills and creative thinking (Torquati et al. 2011; Wilson 2012). Children's play in natural settings is more diverse and includes more imaginative and creative play than in nonnatural settings (Singer et al. 2009). Further, in nature-based play and activities, children have abundant opportunities to develop their social, cognitive, and language skills (Gerdes & Miller 2011). Nature-based activities provide direct, multimodal, and multisensory interactions with natural elements and living things (Singer et al. 2009). Children observe animals and plants, smell rain and soil, listen to the wind and the birds, feel the texture of tree bark and stones, and taste fresh fruit and herbs (Honig 2015).

Research indicates that some specific experiences with plants and animals may be especially powerful in promoting prosocial behavior. For example, Cheng and Monroe (2012) suggest that witnessing a creature (animal or plant) being harmed might foster empathy and the motivation to take care of the creature. Poresky (1990) found that young children who had close relationships with their pets scored higher on a measure of empathy than children who had weak relationships with their pets. This evidence suggests that children

may learn concern, caring, and empathy for living things through interactions and relationships with both human and nonhuman living beings. As such, direct experience exploring nature may be a particularly powerful catalyst for developing concern and caring for living things other than people. Guidance from adults can scaffold young children's meaning making about diverse life forms in nature and also about human diversity (Nimmo & Hallett 2011). The following sections describe each of the prosocial themes, present examples of how the theme was observed, and offer strategies early childhood teachers can use to support each type of prosocial behavior in their programs.

### **Children's play in natural settings is more diverse and includes more imaginative and creative play than in nonnatural settings.**

#### **Respect for nature**

Promoting and modeling respect for nature is an everyday activity for teachers at the SANC Preschool, and children internalize teachers' messages of respect, incorporate them into their own behavior, and communicate the messages to their peers. For example, one day Michael was hitting a tree with a stick and teacher Mary said, "I don't think you should be hitting that tree." Michael replied, "Because it is a baby tree." Teacher Mary said, "Yes, and we want it to grow big

and strong.” A few weeks later, Cami (a child in the same class) observed Shane hitting a tree with a stick and said, “Do not do that. I like trees and you could hurt it.” This ethic of respect and care for plants is frequently expressed by teachers and children. One day Zoe picked a daffodil from the garden at the program. The flower was put in a vase on the table, and during snack time, Cardinal teacher Alexis facilitated a conversation about picking flowers. Alexis explained that bees need the flowers for food and also when flowers are picked, they do not live as long. Alexis said sometimes people plant extra flowers at their homes so that they can pick some and bring them inside.

Another day, children were picking leaves and flowers, and teacher Mary explained, “If they are lying on the ground, it’s okay to pick them up, but if they are still living, please leave them on the plant.” Several children were interviewed about their thoughts and feelings about nature, and when asked the question, “Do you know of any problems that might hurt nature?” some children responded that picking plants, pulling leaves off plants or trees, or hitting trees would hurt nature. From the observations and interviews it appears that children at the SANC Preschool understand that plants are living things and should be treated with respect.

Treating animals with respect is also a daily message at the preschool. One day Brian found a large worm, and there was some conflict over who would hold it. Another child, Justin, tried to stop the conflict.

**Teacher Linda:** Friends, are you being gentle with the worm?

**Justin:** I’m trying to stop the others from arguing over who holds the worm.

**Teacher Linda:** Friends, Justin is trying to tell you something. Please listen respectfully. Justin, can you tell them to handle the worm carefully?

**Justin:** Be careful when you hold the worm.

**Teacher Linda:** Remember, that worm has a job to do. It has to chomp, chomp, chomp through the ground, and then it will leave its castings to feed the forest. [She walks back a few steps and points out worm castings.]

In this interaction, the teacher promoted respect for nature and understanding about the worm’s role in nature, and she explicitly promoted respect for peers when she asked the children to “please listen respectfully.” She also modeled respect by the manner in which she asked the children to listen carefully (“please”), and she facilitated social skills by helping Justin effectively communicate his prosocial message rather than imposing her own directive in the situation. These strategies of modeling—explicitly stating the prosocial ethic (respect), explaining what plants and animals need to live, and discussing the consequences of children’s actions on flowers, worms, insects, and other living things can be implemented in any early childhood program.

### Respect for people

As the children in the Cardinal class approached the nature center one day, teacher Alexis explained that they needed to clean the mud off their hands and boots because otherwise they would make more work for the custodian and maintenance workers: “The floors will be muddy and the mud will clog the sinks, and then Rhonda and Al will have to come and clean it all up and fix the sink.” Rather than simply asking the children to clean mud off before entering the center, this explanation helped them understand the impact of their actions on others, thereby promoting responsibility and nurturing consideration for others.

By the same token, teachers often communicate the importance of respecting others’ work. One day Samantha said, “There’s a snowman! Let’s kill it!” Teacher Melissa said, “Someone built that yesterday. They might be sad if you knock it down.” Similarly, the Cardinal class visited a wigwam built by naturalist Matt, and teacher Linda said, “Are you ready to go in carefully? We have to be respectful because Mr. Matt worked very hard on it. There is a fire pit; don’t jump over it because it might crumble and he worked really hard on that.” Explaining how children’s actions affect other people and explicitly stating the ethic and expectation (be respectful) are strategies that can nurture respect of others.

## Children's Prosocial Behavior Development Toward Nature and Peers Through Nature–Child Interactions

### Theme and example of teacher practice

### Example of children's observed behavior

#### Respect for nature

##### Explain how one's actions affect plants, animals, and other natural elements:

- "If you go off the trail, your feet might crush the plants and they won't be able to grow."
- "Oh, we don't want to dig the bug out with a stick because that might hurt it."
- "This is alive and growing. When you rip it, it is not living anymore. Let's not do that so that it can live."

Teachers also encourage children without special needs to include their peers with disabilities in outdoor activities. For example, children with autism spectrum disorders may engage more frequently in solitary play. When children are engaged in an activity that the teacher knows a child with ASD enjoys, the teacher can bring it to the attention of the children (e.g., "I know that Trevor really likes to play in the sand. Devon, will you please say to Trevor, 'Would you like to play in the sand with me?'").

##### Explicitly state the ethic and expectation:

- "Be gentle with the worm."
- "We want the tree to grow big and strong."
- "Let's be quiet and respectful" [when entering a habitat].
- "Please observe the snails with your eyes, but you need to be respectful."

#### Respect for people

##### Explain how people's actions affect others:

- "Someone worked very hard on that and they would be sad if you ruined it."

##### Explicitly state the ethic and expectation:

- "Your friend has something to say to you. Please listen respectfully."
- "We need to be respectful [of the wigwam] because Mr. Matt worked very hard on it."

##### Explain limitations of peers with disabilities to promote understanding and acceptance:

- "I think Allie would like to join your game. Will you please invite her and show her what you're doing?"

#### Sharing, helping, and taking turns

##### Use behavior reflections to make children aware of how their sharing, helping, and taking turns affect others:

- "You shared the stick. That's a very nice thing to do. You made him really happy."
- "When you jump into the leaf pile that your friends worked so hard to rake, it makes them sad. Ask them if you can have a turn and then wait in line."

##### Teachers may prompt children without special needs to help or share with children with disabilities during nature activities:

- "Show your friend what you have just found under the tree."

##### Structure situations that necessitate sharing and helping:

- "We don't have enough maps for everyone, so if you need to check the map, find a friend who has one and you can share."
- "Let's start with two crackers and one apple slice so everyone has a serving."
- "Let's keep the bucket in the middle so everyone can use it."
- "Who would like to carry the snack?"

##### Reassure children that they will get a turn:

- "Let's sit in a circle and share so everybody gets a turn. We may need to wait a little bit, but everybody will get a turn."

**Tomas:** You should not hit the tree with a stick!

**Bonnie:** Why?

**Tomas:** Because it hurts the tree.

**Teacher Mary:** Tomas is right; we need to respect the tree.

**Teacher Mary:** Chickadees, the afternoon class wanted me to ask you to walk carefully over the ground here because there is something living right underneath our feet. Do you know what it is?

After some discussion of dinosaurs, the children identify bugs and worms as living in the ground.

**Teacher Mary:** Yes, there are bugs and especially worms living under us right now, so we need to be careful walking over their home.

**Noni:** We should slow down to wait for our friends.

**Jared:** Thanks for waiting!

Children step carefully around the fire pit in the wigwam so that it doesn't collapse.

**Mara:** Can I use your stick to dig a hole?

**Lee:** Sure, and I can help you too.

**Mara:** Thanks. Let's dig it!

Two children who frequently play together were patting snow to make snowballs. One said to the other, "Here, I'll help you pat the snow. I love you."

Small groups of children work together to roll snowballs to build snow people.

**Ryu:** I want to help you guys!

**Amelia:** Okay, we're building a giant one next so me and her can sit on it.

**Michael:** I can help you put the arms on the snowman.

**Ellie:** I'll carry the snack!

## Theme and example of teacher practice

## Example of children's observed behavior

### Building friendships and expressing unity

#### Modeling and guidance during daily routines:

- Singing songs during group time that promote friendship.
- Encouraging friends to greet each other as they arrive.
- "Who is missing today? I hope he feels better soon. I miss him."

#### Modeling and guidance during teachable moments:

- After a child tripped and knocked over a block structure, the teacher invited the child to help the builders pick up the blocks and rebuild the structure.

**Teacher Mary:** Let's hold each other's hands and sing our friendship song.

Children start singing while holding each other's hands.

Mara crawled through a hollow log, and Jenny said, "Good job!"

**Mara and Jenny:** Hi, friend! Welcome back!

### Cooperation and teamwork

#### Structure activities for children to work together:

- Teachers organize an activity to haul wood chips in buckets and wheelbarrows to cover a muddy area.
- Children rake leaves and take them to the compost pile.

#### Use behavior reflections to value children's teamwork:

- "Wow! When you cooperate you can really get a lot done!"
- Two children hold ends of a stick while a third tries to break it in the middle, and the teacher says, "Wow! What good teamwork!"

**Peyton:** It's hard to pull this wagon.

**Danny:** We need more friends to pull it. Let's call some more friends.

**Jared:** I can help you to do it. I will push the wagon while you pull it.

**Cody:** Put some water in my bucket.

**Saroj:** Okay. Can we make stew?

**Cody:** Okay!

**Saroj:** We need to keep mixing it. They work together to make stew.

### Empathy for nature and people

#### Use behavior reflections to value children's empathy:

- "Stephan, I am glad that you are so concerned about your friend." [after the child noticed another child had a cut]

#### Help children take the perspective of other people and creatures:

- "Let's be very quiet and try not to scare the turkey."
- "There are bugs and worms living under us right now, so we need to be careful walking over their home."
- "Someone built that snowman. They might be sad if you knock it down."

**Kyle:** Do not hold this worm too tightly; you may hurt it!

**Randy:** Are you okay, friend? You look like you need help.

**Juanita:** I'm going to put my worm in the garden soil, because I think it will be happier there.

Children without special needs may help peers with disabilities understand the importance of environmental protection and natural beauty. When a child with a disability walks into a bed of daffodils:

**Kyle:** Hey, friend, we should not walk over this garden so the flowers can grow. I think we should build fences around the sprouts.

This may help both children develop empathy toward each other and nature (flowers).

### Gratitude

#### Use behavior reflections to make gratitude explicit:

- "That is such a nice idea. Maybe we could all give the tree a hug to say thank you for its delicious sap."
- Teacher Melissa uses behavior reflection when children without special needs help a peer with a disability: "Look, Skylar is smiling. I think she is happy that you invited her into your game."

#### Model gratitude:

- "Friends, take a deep breath of the fresh air. I am so thankful for this beautiful day!"
- "Thank you for your hard work."

#### Incorporate gratitude into daily routines:

- Sing a song of gratitude for friends, food, and nature before snack time.
- Write thank-you notes to class visitors and others.

**Keanna:** Let's give the tree a hug to say thank you for the sap!

**Suzanne:** Teacher, I'm cleaning the bench for you.

**Teacher Mary:** Oh that's so nice. Thank you.





### Sharing, helping, and taking turns

Children at the SANC Preschool frequently demonstrate the prosocial behaviors of sharing, helping, and taking turns. For example, Brandon was watching three ladybugs crawl on his arm, and Mei asked, “Can I have one?” Brandon stepped away, found another ladybug, and gave it to Mei, saying, “Here’s one.” Another day Emily had spent a long time arranging rocks on a large boulder and was upset when she returned the next day to find them missing. Her friend Maria helped her find her “specialest” rock.

In winter, when Emily said, “I can’t get the snow out of the cup,” teacher Mary encouraged another child to help, suggesting, “Margo found a way to do it. Maybe she can help you.” Margo said to Emily, “I’ll show you!” Margo demonstrated how to pack the snow into the cup, flip it over, push the cup into the snow on the ground, and tap the bottom until the packed snow fell out. Emily imitated Margo’s method and successfully emptied her cup.

Children at the preschool often need to take turns to see something interesting. For example, the Goldfinch class stopped during one hike to observe an ant carrying a leaf. The children all wanted to see, and they crowded around. Teacher Melissa said, “Friends, if you’ve had a front-row look, please move so that another friend can see.” Later that day children stood in line to take turns sliding down the “sliding tree.”

Oren and Jamie were straddling a log and pretending to paddle a kayak with long sticks. Jamie sat down too close to Oren, and Oren said, “Wait a minute! Excuse me, Jamie, you’re in the front.” Oren moved to the middle of the log and continued rowing while Jamie got another stick for a paddle. In this situation, the children were

negotiating access to the space and materials while also spatially negotiating how to fit on the log together with long sticks that required a wide area for rowing. Teachers support children’s development of prosocial behavior when they look for opportunities to promote sharing and helping, reassure all children that they will get a turn, and encourage reflections on behavior to help children understand how their sharing, helping, and taking turns affects other people.

### Building friendships and expressing unity

Teachers model actions and guide children to behave in ways that express friendship and unity through daily routines and teachable moments. Unity is an important sense that “we are all in this together.” During circle time, children sing a song of greeting: “Hello, hello, hello, and how are you? I’m fine, I’m fine, and I hope that you are too!” This song expresses caring concern (“how are you?”), wellwishes toward each other (“I hope you are fine”) and unity as a class (all singing together), which helps create a sense of belonging. An opportunity to express friendship arose when Sonia had been absent from school for several days. A teacher saw her approaching and said to the other children, “Who is coming? You’re friends. Are you going to greet her? Tell her ‘Welcome back!’” Abby and Kyle ran toward Sonia, calling, “Welcome back!” The teacher coached the children to help their friend feel welcome by scripting for them, and she also modeled the prosocial norm of greeting friends.

### Teachers support children’s development of prosocial behavior when they look for opportunities to promote sharing and helping, reassure all children that they will get a turn, and encourage reflections on behavior.

On a hike one day, Marco alerted a teacher that another preschooler was wandering off the trail. The teacher retrieved the wandering child, brought him to Marco, and asked Marco to tell the child where our feet need to be and why. Marco explained that the children need to stay on the trail to keep themselves safe and not harm any plants or animals that are off the trail. The teacher said, “Thank you for a great job being a friend.” It is important to note that the teacher facilitated the peer interaction rather than explaining it herself. This gave one child the opportunity to teach another and to practice leadership and communication skills, and it also gave the other child an opportunity to learn from a peer. These examples illustrate how teachers can promote unity and guide skills for building friendships during daily routines and teachable moments.



### Cooperation and teamwork

Children at the SANC Preschool have many opportunities for cooperation and teamwork and frequently demonstrate these social skills. For example, one day the children worked together to haul wood chips to a muddy part of the play area and another day they worked together to build a fort. On another occasion, several children were pushing and pulling a wagon carrying rakes through challenging terrain. Eamon and Anthony were pushing from the back; however, Eamon was too far over to one side, so the children were having a hard time making the wagon go straight. Tom, who was pulling, stopped and said, “Eamon, move over so that you are both in the center to push.” Eamon moved to the center of the wagon and together they accomplished the task easily.

Children also encourage each other. Katrina and Maddie used a stick and a wood chip to try to cut open a large gourd. They tried different pieces of wood as tools. Katrina picked up a small stick to poke into the gourd and used a sawing motion. Maddie tried to use a stick as a lever. Maddie said to Katrina, “We’re really doing it right, right? We need something sharp.” After they successfully broke the gourd open, Katrina said, “We ripped it open! We’re doing such a good job! We opened it!” The children demonstrated persistence and cooperation as they worked together to accomplish their goal. Teachers can structure activities for children to work together, such as raking leaves or spreading wood chips. Teachers can also use behavior reflections to value children’s teamwork—“Working together you made such a big leaf pile!”—and help them to reflect on how much they can accomplish together.

### Empathy for nature and people

When children are in nature, they have many opportunities to develop prosocial behaviors such as caring and empathy toward animals and plants. Direct experiences with nature provoke curiosity and questions about the plants, animals, places, and elements the children encounter. Adults’ responses to these questions, in terms of content, value, and manner, can influence children’s meaning making. Teachers can explain phenomena from the perspective of the plant or animal in question, thus promoting perspective taking. Teachers can also provide factual information that fosters a sense of familiarity and comfort with nature. Perhaps most important, teachers can value and convey respect for nature through the manner in which they communicate as well as the content of their responses. The following examples demonstrate how teachers promote perspective taking, provide factual information, and convey respect and value for nature.

One day Kyle found a small toad, and the children began to crowd around to see it. Teacher Melissa said, “Let’s give it some space. If we’re all grabbing at this little toad, do you think it might be a little scared? Do you think it might get hurt? What do you think we can do so everyone can see the toad? We need to be very careful.” The children made suggestions, and came up with a plan. Teacher Melissa said, “Let’s sit in a circle and share so everybody gets a turn. We may need to wait a little bit, but everybody will get a turn. We don’t want to scare him or hurt him. I will hold him, and you can touch him. Remember that we are in his home. He’s jumpy. He’s getting very anxious. Oh, don’t touch his eyes, do you like it when someone touches your eyes?” Teacher Melissa cradled the toad in her hand, and held it out to each child, opening her hand slightly so the child could see and touch it, but the toad could not escape.



When every child had a turn, teacher Melissa said, “What do you think we should do with the toad to keep him safe?” Bonnie suggested putting the toad in the grass where they found it. Teacher Melissa said, “I’m going to put him right here and watch him hop away. Let’s stand back and watch. Can you see him?” The teacher’s questioning effectively scaffolded children’s perspective taking and empathy toward an animal. Helping children understand the perspective of other creatures and other people can nurture empathy and promote prosocial behavior.

**Modeling gratitude, incorporating thankfulness into daily routines, and using behavior reflections to make gratitude explicit can effectively nurture children’s gratitude.**

Teachers often use questioning as a tool to develop children’s empathy or caring toward nature. For example, teacher Alexis asked, “Why is it important that we stay on the trail?” and Michael responded, “If we go off the trail, we may hurt the soil, which will make it hard for trees to live—like the maple trees. And maple trees make syrup.”

**Gratitude**

Gratitude is nurtured in many ways at the SANC Preschool. When the teachers and children tap the maple trees for sap (to make syrup), the teachers thank the tree for the sap, modeling gratitude. This ethic was extended through an activity in the Goldfinch class in which the teacher had taken a bottle of maple syrup, as a gift, from the SANC Preschool to a school in another state where the children have pen pals. When she returned,

the teacher brought the children a gift from their pen pals—a bottle of honey made by the bees that visit the wildflowers at the school. The teacher took a picture of the Goldfinch class with the honey and sent it to their pen pals with a thank-you note the children had written. Exchanging gifts from nature and expressing gratitude for the gifts provided an opportunity to share and also an opportunity to reflect on how humans rely on nature.

Gratitude is nurtured throughout the daily routines at the SANC Preschool. For instance, at snack time children sing a song of gratitude that has accompanying movements: “Thank you for the wind and rain and sun and pleasant weather, thank you for the food we eat and that we are together.” Children put their arms around their neighbors when they sing about togetherness. Modeling gratitude, incorporating thankfulness into daily routines, and using behavior reflections to make gratitude explicit can effectively nurture children’s gratitude.

**Conclusion**

Children can develop prosocial behaviors toward nature and people through well-planned and well-implemented activities in nature. Teachers, parents, and other adults can support and scaffold children’s understanding of and respect for nature by drawing attention to the needs and perspectives of other living things (Wilson 2012). The same is true for promoting empathy for other people. This article described how children were encouraged to respect the work of other people by taking care not to ruin a snowman, a wigwam, the floor, or the sink, and to respect the work of animals by taking care not to ruin their homes. Adults can model respect for nature and convey value for diverse life forms. Fostering children’s understanding and respect can lay the foundation for prosocial behavior toward nature and people.

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