

“A vegetable garden is a wonderful way of awakening the senses in young children”

Interview with
Stéphanie Lubrano,
Director of the Mil'mouch nursery,
at Bray-sur-Seine (Seine-et-Marne),
Claire Grolleau,
Chair of the association Label Vie.

KEY POINTS

► **Genuine contact with nature is essential for the emotional and social development of young children. This notion is one of the ten principles of the French national charter for preschool childcare, created by ministerial decree on 23 September 2021. A number of facilities have already embarked on this path, supported by the association Label Vie, including the non-profit Mil'mouch nursery in Seine-et-Marne. The crops growing in the garden, along with the plants and small animals in the green space, are all proving to be a solid foundation for learning. Best practices, particularly concerning sustainable food, are catching on among families, who get involved in the project through workshops.**

La Santé en action: What is different about the Mil'mouch nursery?

Stéphanie Lubrano: Located in a semi-rural area of Seine-et-Marne, our nursery has 32 places and employs a dozen childcare professionals. This staff ratio is higher than average and means that children aged between 3 months and 3 years are better cared for, as well as improving the quality of life at work. The non-profit nursery is part of a family services centre within the First 1,000 Days project¹. We found out about Label Vie through the Family Benefits Service (CAF).

They awarded us a grant to build our facility, which was awarded the Ecolo crèche® (“Green Childcare”) label in 2020.

S.A.: What does the Label Vie association offer?

Claire Grolleau: Since 2009, we have been supporting structures that cater for vulnerable groups (nurseries, leisure centres) in their ecological and social transition by promoting new practices through the Ecolo crèche® label. We have helped almost 1,600 organisations since that date, impacting almost 50,000 children. We focus on different aspects such as water, energy and waste management; our global environmental approach allows us to explore the fields of sustainable food, gardening and biodiversity, along with the well-being and health of children and staff alike. We champion a holistic view of health that includes all living beings, through multifaceted and participatory approaches, in order to restore the power of agency to everyone. Our association has become a benchmark for institutions such as the National Family Benefits Service (CNAF) and the Department for Social Cohesion (DGCS), who have been members of our strategic committee for several years and with whom we work to develop public policy. This is a substantial partnership to support the ecological transition in the early childhood sector. Our actions are evaluated by a third party as part of the impact contract with the French Agency for Ecological Transition (ADEME), which is monitoring our project.

S.A.: What role does nature play for the children at Mil'mouch?

S.L.: We have an outdoor area of 800 m², including a courtyard of 250 m², a vegetable garden of 300 m² and a “wild” area of 250 m² with a small pond, shrubs, grass, etc. In the garden, there’s a “seeds for artists” corner where we sow plants that we use to produce natural paint with the children. There are fruit bushes (raspberries, mulberries, redcurrants, etc.) and we grow a wide variety of vegetables: no potatoes as they take up too much space, but we do have lettuces, cabbages, carrots, chard, spinach, onions, radishes and even tomatoes. These crops provide 80% of the vegetables needed for meals. We do as many activities as possible outside, in the garden or on the banks of the Seine. Working in the vegetable garden, whether preparing the soil at the end of winter, planting, tending or harvesting, is a wonderful way of awakening the senses in young children. You should see them discovering earthworms or snails! For those who can’t walk or crawl yet, we have sensory containers that we fill with earth, leaves, moss, small pieces of wood and so on. Contact with nature stimulates children’s creativity.

C.G.: For staff in the childcare sector, it’s no longer a matter of course to take young children outdoors and provide early-learning activities linked to nature. The semantic change in the French term for the profession is also interesting: it used to reference gardens, calling nursery school teachers “jardinières d’enfants” (“child gardeners”), before evolving into “early years educators”. Over

have produced a bibliographic summary of scientific work for members of our network, focusing on the way in which nature can positively shape microbiota, which are mediators of health, particularly in the early stages of life. We have also seen a 34% drop in absenteeism among staff at nurseries involved in this type of approach. This is undoubtedly because these participatory management projects mean that they can get involved to a greater extent, giving them a greater sense of job satisfaction by looking after children in better conditions.

A PROJECT TO HELP ALL AGES (RE)CONNECT WITH NATURE

How can we encourage young children and the parents or professionals who look after them to be more in touch with the natural environment? This is the objective of the Experiences of Nature project, run by the association Label Vie in conjunction with partners from the children's, education and environment sectors. It aims to provide practical support for adults through educational tools listing activities in nature to "take the first step" and through a community on social media for exchanging ideas and practices.

In early 2025, an online citizen-science platform will be launched, in part to record children's various experiences of nature. "Sensory interaction with natural elements, encountering living things" can take the form of games, walks, sensory experiments, artistic creations and so on. This project is the subject of a research programme based on data collected by the collaborative platform and qualitative interviews. Its aim is to define the effects on the development of young children, but also on the well-being of those around them, and on the quality of the child-adult relationship. This work is supervised by the Centre for Ecology and Conservation Sciences (CESCO laboratory) at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle and the Centre for Research into Social Connections (CERLIS laboratory), a mixed research unit of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), attached to the Paris Cité and Sorbonne Nouvelle universities. It has received funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR).

Feature

Preserving Nature to Protect Human Health

the last few decades, concerns about safety and hygiene have meant that we have replaced natural areas with petroleum-based soft floors; all toys are now made of plastic that can be disinfected. And the children have fallen out of touch with the earth. But is it better for their development to be in contact with polymers or living organisms? The association offers training in leading educational gardening and sustainable food production. For young children, growing the food that will end up on their plates is a learning process that combines curiosity, patience and effort.

S.L.: At Mil'mouch, the food is cooked on the premises, using ingredients from the kitchen garden, supplemented by locally sourced produce. We have changed our menus to offer a more plant-based diet, while maintaining an intake of animal protein in line with the guidelines from the Mothers and Early Years Service (PMI). Children are less reluctant to taste unfamiliar foods or foods that don't look like their meals at home – for example, carrot sticks instead of breaded fish – because they will have seen these vegetables growing in the garden, and will have picked and cleaned them.

S.A.: ***What does this kind of contact with the natural elements offer young children?***

S.L.: Nature is an everyday laboratory where children experiment with many things, where fundamental learning takes place. It's a space that stimulates motor skills, creativity, relationships with others and independence. I find that the children are more composed, more attentive. They also fall ill less often and generally sleep better.

C.G.: Nature encourages free play and exploration, something that educators and child psychologists have been recommending for a long time. We have also observed that the rate of child absence due to illness is falling in nurseries that have adopted eco-friendly practices, according to the figures we monitor each year. However, it remains difficult to isolate the "nature factor" from other factors such as reducing the use of polluting cleaning products that are harmful to the respiratory tract. Nevertheless, contact with the natural environment plays a role, as children are exposed to a wide variety of micro-organisms, the vast majority of which are non-pathogenic, which boosts their microbiota and strengthens their immune system. We



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S.A.: Do you see any obstacles to this immersion in nature?

C.G.: Some families don't want their children to get their clothes dirty. Educational gardens can also be seen as generating extra work for staff, whether childcare assistants, educators or cleaners. That's why it's important to share the project with the whole team. Parents also fear exposure to potentially toxic plants, or contamination of green spaces by animal droppings. Education is needed to counter the fear of nature and its supposed dangers, and to show that there are more benefits than risks for their children. Informing them of existing practices in other childcare facilities where everything is going well helps to remove these obstacles.

S.L.: When parents come to enrol their children, we tell them about the Mil'mouch project. We ask them to dress their children appropriately for

the garden, explaining that the activities take place in small groups and that digging in the soil does not put their child in danger. We post photos at different points during the nursery day, which allows us to convey our vision of childcare. We also organise workshops for families. Some already have vegetable gardens but don't know how they can involve their children. We show them how to get children gardening, preparing meals, making compost and so on. These discussions help to ensure that messages about environmental protection, which goes hand in hand with health protection, are better received and understood. We want everything we do in our organisation to catch on among the families, so they can use the ideas and put them into practice at home, on a day-to-day basis. At the same time, care must be taken to recruit staff who, on top of qualifications and experience, must also

share these values: a relationship with nature, a home-made focus in activities, etc. Otherwise, it's not going to work as it should.

S.A.: Can the cost of an educational garden represent another issue?

S.L.: I don't notice any additional costs, as we use produce from the garden in the kitchen. Admittedly, this requires more creativity. We appeal for donations of seeds and plants, which means we have to keep traceability records to comply with health regulations. To our delight, this approach gave us a wide variety of tomato plants, all of different shapes and colours that really interested the children. We also use permaculture: to build our "lasagne garden", we asked parents to bring in small pieces of wood, which encouraged them to get out into the countryside with their children.

C.G.: There can be an additional cost to creating a green space in a concrete nursery. Through its fund for the modernisation of childcare facilities, which has been allocated 242 million euros for 2023–2027, the CAF provides funding to carry out work such as removing artificial impermeable coverings, creating a garden or installing a planted pergola to provide shade, coolness and biodiversity. In this way, the institutions are supporting the efforts of childcare professionals to restore nature, which is synonymous with a general improvement in well-being in our facilities. ■

**Interview by Nathalie Quéruel,
Editor-in-Chief.**

1. The "Maison des 1000 premiers jours" ("Family Centres for the First 1,000 Days") project was recommended in the report submitted in September 2020 by the Cyrulnik Commission. Online: <https://www.1000-premiers-jours.fr/fr>

For more information

Order of 23 September 2021 creating a national charter for early-years childcare. Online: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000044126586>; <https://solidarites.gouv.fr/charte-nationale-pour-laccueil-du-jeune-enfant>