



Two of the trays on the table showing beach collection and one showing leaves, lichens, bark (paper bark) pine cones—the life cycle and seeds.

# The Discovery Table in Action

BY DEE PIGNÉGUY

**A** DISCOVERY TABLE MAY BE THE FIRST OPPORTUNITY THAT A CHILD HAS TO CONNECT WITH NATURE, SO THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO EXCUSE FOR NOT HAVING AN EXCITING discovery table in your centre.

Discovery tables are a fun, meaningful way to discover, observe and investigate some of nature's concepts, without an adult and at the child's own pace.\*\*

Your purpose, the age of the children, the resources available and the space you have will all help you decide. Here are some factors to consider when setting up a discovery table:

- A link between the room and the outside world
- An interactive place
- A table for displaying the childrens' natural treasures
- A place for children to discover nature's seasons depicting the changes taking place in the natural world.
- Found items for manipulation and play
- A place for sensory play
- As an introduction to ethnic foods
- A place for children to create crafts

- A place to learn about science tools
- A place to learn more about change and lifecycles—plants and insects
- A place to discover the importance of seeds and how they grow
- A place to display and discover the plants we eat from the seeds that we grow.

Whatever you want it to be, simple or complex, it is only limited by your imagination. You will discover suitable items wherever you go in nature—at the beach, in the forest, in sand dunes, parks and gardens. Best of all, when you are searching for the items you want, don't forget to ask the parents to lend or gift you some of their natural treasures.

If you don't have space for a table, use trays, baskets, a drawer or a shelf, and make sure the display is visually pleasing and changed regularly. Children learn science through hands-on exploration. Simply playing with natural materials will give them the opportunity of finding ways to use nature's treasures. Nature is all about diversity, so make sure you reflect that in



The purpose made pattern display box and a selection of skeletons, feathers, special display boxes, and bones. Note the dehydrated rat.



Using trays again for rocks, pumice, fossils and the sand display with magnets.

your ever-changing display. A collection of books to help children to expand their knowledge and vocabulary is extremely useful; some can be stories and some science picture books with lots of photographs. Change these often depending on the theme of your table.

There are special wooden viewing boxes with sliding Perspex covers available for those treasures that are too fragile for the children to handle. I also had a custom-made tray with all the little slots so many of nature's patterns could be displayed together. Working on that same principle, children should be encouraged to collect small boxes for the same purpose. One that I found particularly useful was a chocolate box, but some jewellery boxes would also work. If nothing is handy, egg cartons will fill the bill.

Dried flowers and leaves are extremely useful to show the different patterns, colours and shapes of nature, and make an ideal subject for art work. Rose petals, especially from scented roses, can be dried for making potpourri. If you don't have a flower press for drying leaves and flowers, an old telephone book will work very well. The pages are best if the paper is absorbent.

Potpourri is a great way to introduce the children to scented plants and flowers that can take the place of air fresheners and toxic chemicals used to make the bathroom smell nice. Introducing a mortar and pestle and spices to grind up will add a new dimension to nature's air freshener blend.

Plant a display of scented flowers in pots for your discovery table. A variety of scented rose petals will do the job, and put a call out to parents for a supply. Petals can be dried in brown paper bags, on trays, or spread out on old lacy curtains, out of sunlight.

Small jars of beach sand provide hours of play. Once you start collecting sand you will find it varies from place to place and at different levels on the beach. Make sure you contact someone on the West Coast to send you some of their iron sand as the children will love using the magnets on it.

The sand can be partnered with a collection of rocks and some crystals, pumice and fossils if you can find them.

Having the stuffed kingfisher provided a real opportunity to see biomimetics in action. Even though the bird has been dead for some time, when put into the direct sunlight the feathers gleamed with their gorgeous blues and greens. The brilliant colours are not due to any pigment. Instead colour is created through the prism-like structure of the feathers' surfaces. Like a rainbow, the light is split and reflected to the child's eye.



The kingfisher (in the sunshine)

A close-up photo of the feathers shows how this is achieved. A great opportunity to introduce the prism and the idea of biomimicry.

An inspiring discovery table should include a selection of tools consisting of such things as a mortar and pestle, magnets, a prism, tweezers and small scoops, magnifying glasses of various sizes, an insect viewing tube, binoculars, a Fresnel lens, and a balance scale.

As well as using 'Exploring Nature's Pattern Magic', I would recommend that you use 'Harvesting Dreams: Hundertwasser For Kids', by Barbara Stieff, which contains great inspiration for creative activities. For an introduction to Biomimicry, 'Nature's Techno Tricks' will be invaluable.

\*\*Unassisted discovery generally does not benefit learning. Unguided discovery activities are too ambiguous to allow learners to transcend the mere activity to reach the level of constructivism intended. (Attieri et al 2011)



Dee's books and workshops help educators strengthen their connections to nature.

Her creative ideas will help you develop nature-based learning environments even in urban areas. [www.feedmeright.co.nz](http://www.feedmeright.co.nz)