The Classic Parents' and Teachers' Nature Awareness Guidebook

Sharing Nature with Children

by Joseph Cornell
How to Be An Effective Nature-Guide

Suggestions for Good Teaching

Before we begin exploring nature with children, let's think for a moment about our role as teachers/guides. What are the basic rules we need to teach—what are the basic attitudes and principles that guide our teaching? What do we need to think about and consider when planning our trips?

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1. Teaching that have helped me work with children's lively, eager, and enthusiastic spirit are basic attitudes and principles that guide our teaching. These principles are:

   a. Respect for children and their abilities.
   b. Understanding the needs and interests of children.
   c. Encouraging children to explore and discover.
   d. Fostering a love for nature.

Teach these attitudes and principles to children.

Besides teaching children to be good nature-guards, we must also teach them about the basic principles of nature. For example, if children are to learn about the life cycle of a plant, they must first understand the concept of growth and development. Similarly, if children are to learn about the behavior of animals, they must first understand the concept of survival and adaptation.

In teaching children about nature, we must also consider the importance of safety. Children must be taught how to stay safe in the natural environment and how to recognize potential hazards.

Teaching children about nature is a vital part of their education. It is through this knowledge that they will be able to appreciate the beauty and diversity of the natural world. By teaching children about nature, we help them to develop a sense of wonder and respect for the world around them.
five feet to reach the rocky soil below. At the time, it was at least two hundred years old, and only eight feet tall. The children would frequently make a detour on their hikes just to empty their canteens by its roots. Several of them returned to the camp year after year, watching the tree's stubborn struggle for life in its harsh environment. In fact, as soon as they arrived at camp, they would run out to see how it had fared through the dry autumn and cold winter. Their loving concern awakened in me an even deeper respect for the mountain hemlock.

I believe it is important for an adult to share his inner self with the child. Only by sharing our deeper thoughts and feelings do we communicate, and inspire in others, a love and respect for the earth. When we share our own ideas and feelings, it encourages a child to explore, respectfully, his own feelings and perceptions. A wonderful mutual trust and friendship develops between the adult and the child.

2. Be receptive. Receptivity means listening, and being aware. It is one of the most richly rewarding attitudes you can cultivate while working with children. The outdoors brings out a spontaneous enthusiasm in the child that you can skillfully direct toward learning.

Be sensitive: every question, every comment, every joyful exclamation is an opportunity to communicate. Respond to the child's present mood and feelings. Expand your child's interests by teaching along the grain of his own curiosity. When you respect his thoughts, you'll find your time with him flowing easily and happily.

Be alert also to what nature is doing around you at the present moment. Something exciting or interesting is almost always happening. Your lesson plan will be written for you minute by minute if you tune in with sensitive attention.

3. Focus the child's attention without delay. Set the tone of the outing right at the start. Involve everyone as much as you can, by asking questions and pointing out interesting sights and sounds. Some children are not used to watching nature closely, so find things that interest them, and lead them bit by bit into the spirit of keen observation. Let them feel that their findings are interesting to you, too.

4. Look and experience first; talk later. At times nature's spectacles will seize the child in rapt attention: a newly-emerged dragonfly pumping blood into tender unfolding wings, a lone deer grazing in a forest clearing. But even if those special sights are lacking, the child can have an experience of wonder by just watching quite ordinary things with close attention. Children have a marvelous capacity for absorbing themselves in whatever they're looking at. Your child will gain a far better understanding of things outside himself by becoming one with them than he will from second-hand talk. Children seldom forget a direct experience.

Don't feel badly about not knowing names. The names of plants and animals are only superficial labels for what those things really are. Just as your own essence isn't captured by your name, or even by your physical and personality traits, there is also much more to an oak tree,
for example, than a name and a list of facts about it. You can gain a deeper appreciation of an oak tree by watching how the tree's mood shifts with changes in lighting at different times of day. Observe the tree from unusual perspectives. Feel and smell its bark and leaves. Quietly sit on or under its branches, and be aware of all the forms of life that live in and around the tree and depend on it.

Look. Ask questions. Guess. Have fun! As your children begin to develop an attunement with nature, your relationship with them will evolve from one of teacher and fellow-student to one of fellow-adventurer.

5. A sense of joy should permeate the experience, whether in the form of gaiety or calm attentiveness. Children are naturally drawn to learning if you can keep the spirit of the occasion happy and enthusiastic. Remember that your own enthusiasm is contagious, and that it is perhaps your greatest asset as a teacher.

Choosing the Right Game for the Time and Place

THE NATURE GAMES in this book will teach children many kinds of lessons—some obvious, some quite subtle. You may want to use certain games because of the personal qualities they develop in the child, or because of the concepts they teach. You can also choose games to complement the mood of your group, or to create a desirable change in attitude or energy. To make it easy for you to tell quickly what each game is like, I have included with each activity a quick-reference chart, like the one on the opposite page. This includes:

A. Basic mood of each game is indicated by one of three animal symbols:

- **Calm/Reflective**
  Bears are very curious, and lead solitary, quiet lives. In the religion of the Plains Indians, the bear is the symbol of introspection.

- **Active/Observational**
  The crow is an extremely alert and intelligent rascal, who's likely to be found keenly observing anything that's going on.

- **Energetic/Playful**
  The otter spends his days frolicking; the only animal that plays (constantly!) throughout adult life, he is nature's embodiment of exuberant fun.

B. The concepts, attitudes and qualities it teaches
C. When and where to play
D. Number of players needed
E. Best age range
F. Special materials needed, if any

At the end of the book, you will find all the games indexed in four ways: according to the attitudes and qualities they encourage in children; according to the concepts they teach; according to the environment in which they can best be used; and according to the mood they express. I hope that this system will enable you to make the best, most creative use of these games and activities.