

Sharing the Wonder of Nature with Young Children

“Wonder is the wellspring of knowledge; it is also the basis of creativity and imagination.” Edith Cobb – The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood

In *Nature and Young Children* (2008) Ruth Wilson shows parents and other care-givers how to share nature with young children.

“Wonder, creativity, and imagination can not be taught. It is through wonder that we come to know the world. Rather than focusing on “teaching” children about the natural world, adults should focus on developing an awareness and enjoyment of the beauty and wonder of nature.”

We support wonder when we provide the tools for exploration, experimentation, and representation – binoculars, magnifying glasses, writing and drawing materials, collection boxes, digging tools, etc.

Ruth Wilson’s advice:

Begin with simple experiences.

Many children have very little or no direct experience with the natural environments. Start slowly. An earthworm may seem as poisonous as a snake. Use gentle, gradual exposure in their encounters with nature.

Keep children actively involved.

Children learn when they are actively engaged with materials, children, and their leader. Think about being the facilitator or enabler instead of a teacher. Help children realize that they can discover their own knowledge. Observe carefully, listen closely, and answer questions simply.

Provide pleasant, memorable experiences.

Children develop a lifelong interest in learning through experiences that are pleasant and memorable, not forced or dull. “Do not touch” will never work with young children. They need to hold and manipulate. The enjoyment factor of an activity needs to be planned as carefully as the content factor.

Emphasize experiencing versus teaching.

Young children need to be involved in sharing and doing versus listening and watching. They need to explore, experiment, and follow their own curiosity and ideas. When a child asks, “What’s that?” they may not want a name. Pose other questions for the children to consider – questions that encourage the child to seek their own answers. Is it alive? How does it move? Do you see eyes, nose, mouth, ears, etc.? What do you think it eats?

Engage full use of the senses.

“Immersing techniques” help children see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the world of nature.

- Take off shoes and socks to increase physical contact.
- Crawl on the ground instead of walking.
- Simulate natural processes. (move like the wind, float like a cloud)
- Temporarily block the sense of sight or sound to heighten the other senses.
- Pet or hug selected things in nature (tree, flower, leaf, or stone).

Demonstrate a personal interest in and enjoyment of the natural world.

Authentic interest and enjoyment are critical to promoting young children’s positive engagement with the natural world. It is the adult’s own sense of wonder that will ignite and sustain a young child’s interest and involvement with nature. Young children learn more about attitudes and values from their observations of adults’ behavior than they do from what adults say.

20 second nature break – take 20 seconds to stop and look up, down, and all around noticing plants and animals.

Model caring for the environment through gentleness in behavior. It is important to teach a child not to step on a caterpillar. It’s good for the child and for the caterpillar.

Maintain a warm, accepting, and nurturing atmosphere.

Children learn best in a warm and friendly environment. They need to know they can trust the adults who work with them.

Focus on the beauty and wonder of nature.

The most important thing young children can learn about the Earth is that it is full of beauty and wonder. It is a sense of wonder that will serve as the strongest incentive to save Planet Earth.