

Introduction

The environmental problems that confront us today are as varied as they are severe. [Climate change], the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the rain forests are large problems that seem insurmountable. At the same time, in the last twenty years, environmental awareness has steadily increased. Clearly, the future of our planet will depend on the degree to which all our children are made environmentally aware, respectful of our planet Earth and its natural kingdoms, and sensitive to the higher quality of nature.

The task is large, yet children are naturally suited for this challenge. They come into life with a sense that the world is good and beautiful. Our interactions with them and the ways in which we bring them into contact with nature can either enhance these intuitions or destroy them. When children are met with love and respect, they will have love and respect to give. Our task as the parents and educators of young children is not to make them frightfully aware of environmental dangers, but rather provide them with opportunities to experience what Rachel Carson called “the sense of wonder.” Out of this wonder can grow a feeling of kinship with the Earth.

We must allow them to play with the elements of earth, air, water, and carefully supervised, to experience the quiet power and beauty of fire. Through nature crafts and natural toys and opportunities to joyfully experience and celebrate the seasons of the year with all that nature brings, we can hope to plant the seeds of a new attitude of reverence toward nature. This childhood experience may then mature, when they are adults, into a love-warmed thinking which will not allow them to treat the Earth as a possession or commodity that they have the right to exploit, but rather as a precious gift which it is their honor and duty to protect and enhance.

Joseph Cornell, environmental educator and author of *Sharing Nature with Children*, stated this so well when he said that children need to build a strong foundation of love for the environment so that reason will follow feeling.

We will serve our children well when we turn their attention to the stones, the grasses and flowers, the trees and animals by finding meaningful and creative ways to allow nature to enter our classrooms and play areas, and by bringing our children out into nature as much as possible. A loving relationship with nature will not only promote health for our planet but health for our children as well. Contact with nature can bring simplicity back into the lives of children (and parents and teachers!)” the simplicity of nature’s pace, the simplicity of the seasons. All children should have the opportunity to delight in the simple sound of a bird’s song; in the texture of a tree’s bark; in the sweet smell of freshly turned earth.

In addition, we must find gentle and loving ways to show the children sound environmental practices such as recycling, composting and, above all, thrift. For young children, leading by example is preferable to heavy-handed explanations which leave a residue of guilt and fear.

Environmental awareness will come naturally to children when it is integrated into the early childhood classroom and home as a way of life.

- Carol Petrash, Earthways 1992