

Engaging Each Child in the Group

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I retired in July of 2012 after thirty-two years as curator of education for Reynolda Gardens of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. Reynolda Gardens is comprised of 129 acres that were once part of the RJ Reynolds estate. It includes formal gardens, greenhouses, a meadow, a wetland, and woods. I view it as a microcosm of the natural Piedmont landscape and an outdoor learning laboratory. I was in charge of school field trip and summer programs. Most of the children with whom I worked were in grades K through 5. All of the programs that I developed are based on a small-group model; that is, knowledgeable adults lead small groups of children. Except in winter, when programs are based in the greenhouse, activities take place outdoors.

Charles invited me to speak today because he thought you would be interested in a discussion based on my response, in the form of a long letter to the editors of Orion Magazine, to an article by David Sobel that appeared in their publication last summer, in which he said that environmental educators are suppressing children's desire to learn about nature, through the activities that they plan for them. He believes that environmental education should be about recreating the wilderness ideal for children learning about nature—the free-roaming childhood, where each is able to experience and learn about nature on his own. He argues that environmental educators should recreate this experience for children by providing play opportunities and encouraging free exploration at their sites. He highlighted some real programs that he felt were exemplary, and he created realistic-sounding scenarios to serve as illustrations of programs he saw as ineffective and wrong. He was writing for a general, but well-educated and interested, audience, most of whom are probably not environmental educators. Many environmental educators responded, both to the magazine and to the EE office. Some were all for the Sobel ideas, others incensed by them. I wrote the letter because I thought it vitally important that people understand that environmental educators must educate as many people as possible as well and as quickly as possible and that they should be revered as the last keepers of knowledge and leaders vital to the future of the earth.... But apparently the editors did not agree; other pieces in the same vein have since appeared, but mine hasn't. (If you haven't already, check the Newstips section of the EENC site for a link to the original article, Marty's comments, and my response.)

I have no quarrel with the premise that children would be better off if they have free access to nature nor that they should have opportunities for free play in parks. It's been well documented that children develop a closer connection with nature if they experience it than if

they don't and widely believed that children must have a connection with nature in order to feel protective of it. My position is that many people outside of our field, those who don't actually see large numbers of children in nature, don't seem to realize that childhood has changed in fundamental ways in the last few years. Or that for children to use the precious little time they have to spend in nature without direction or, at least, support, is more likely to lead, not to the profound understanding that they expect, but to confusion, misunderstanding, and fear. Based on the experiences of their own childhoods, they promote a way of learning about nature that insists that all children will have freedom to roam and proximity to natural areas. This paradigm is simply not within the reach of most children today. But in defense of those on the outside of environmental education, as well as those of us inside it who are experiencing varying degrees of uncertainty on how to proceed, change is happening so quickly that people don't have time to adjust to it, to look around and see what can be retained or retrieved from the "old days," and what must be changed in order to help develop an environmentally literate nation.

It is important to acknowledge that environmental educators work with groups, whether it's a family, scout, special interest, or school group and that we work within some sort of park or preserve that exists at least in part because it is representative of the natural world before the intrusion of human activity and that has been set aside for that reason. We recognize that the truly natural world is effectively gone, and this is all we have left to show for it. We are the caretakers of our preserves and the gatekeepers of knowledge. In light of the environmental challenges facing the world today, what we do may be the most important human activity of our time. We're the ones who understand nature and who determine what many people know about it. We have a real chance of reaching many more children than will have the opportunity to enjoy the so-called natural childhood. For that reason, it is of vital importance to engage each child in the group.

What is the purpose of environmental education, from our point of view? We want children to learn facts, to appreciate the intricacy of life, and to recognize the importance of the world immediately around them. An end result for us is a knowledgeable person who carries information throughout life. More than that, a person who is aware of the planet and will have the passion to care about it, no matter what challenge to its safety arises. We're not looking for a great test score—instead, for a little spark of interest and imagination. Having experienced it ourselves and dedicated our lives to sharing knowledge with others, we know where a tiny spark can lead.

The philosophy that I developed over a lifetime spent in environmental education, and that I presented in my letter, is based on understanding what children want. I think you would agree that people generally learn best when they receive what they want. Based on my own

observations, I will first share eight wants with you, along with a brief explanation of why each is significant. After this overview, I'll suggest ways that they can help inform your programming.

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What do children want?

They want your attention.

Children today come from families that are structured quite differently from what we might remember. They are often lost in the chaos of daily life. Contact with adults who are knowledgeable about nature is infrequent. Their observations about nature are rarely honored and their questions are not answered at home or school. They are often hungry for recognition, for someone to hear them and to answer their questions.

They want adventure outside school walls.

Many children essentially live at school, at least five days a week. The grounds, often described as similar to prison yards, do not invite exploration. There are no plants in the classrooms. The air is an even temperature, and there are no insects. Imagine how easily traveling away from school to explore nature can ignite imagination and create memories—the hallmarks of a great adventure.

They want you to see them for who they are.

They are children of today, not yesterday. They may not explore much outside, but, thanks to technology, they know a great deal more than we did at their age. They have access to a vast amount of information, and they are familiar with many of the world's animals and ecosystems from a very early age. They want to share their knowledge with you and, in turn, to learn from you.

They want to be treated with respect.

Since they live in a highly scheduled world, they have come to expect that time devoted to an activity will be well-spent. And, they know that adults sometimes dismiss their ideas, just because they are children. They thrive when activities are based on a foundation of respect for their time, as well as their intellectual capacity.

They want their own perspectives and boundaries to be honored.

Children come to us with knowledge, experience, and feelings that determine their reactions to the information and activities we offer them. It's not always easy to read responses in the short

time we are with them, but it's absolutely necessary to try. If they know they can trust you not to overstep their boundaries, they are willing to hear what you have to say.

They want to know that there is order in the world, that people before them have discovered it, and that it can be understood.

Nature is overwhelming to children who ordinarily see very little of it, and fear of the unknown is a very common reaction to a first visit to a public garden or park. When a caring, knowledgeable guide shows them how pieces fit together to make the whole of nature, their own desire for order is fulfilled.

They want to understand science. They like to know why and how scientists study the earth; how they recognize, analyze, and solve problems; and they like to think of themselves as scientists.

It is difficult for children to understand how science activities at school could lead to a life in the sciences, and why anyone would want to do that. In their time with you, they are able to join the circle of real scientists and feel the excitement of discovery, just as the elder scientists do.

They want to help.

They hear the talk about how things will be in a few years: The world will be too hot to support life; the oceans will rise; animals will become extinct. They see dramatic examples of how change has already become evident. But how can they help stop the disaster? They want to know: What can I do?

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How can we satisfy their wants and free them to learn?

So now: In practical terms, how is this philosophy expressed at a site? What challenges do we need to meet? What compromises will we have to make?

I will talk about my own experiences to help you know that you are not alone in your challenges, but I invite you to substitute the name of your site for mine. As a preacher I once heard said, "I'm at the pulpit speaking to you, and I hope you're listening. But more than that, I hope that something I say will start you thinking about your own concerns. I may be the one talking, but you're out there chasing your own rabbits. And I'm glad of that." An especially apropos metaphor for us, don't you think?

They want your attention.

This is first, because it's the hardest to accomplish. When a teacher insists on bringing the entire grade level, you begin at a disadvantage. How can you attend to the needs of each child? At some sites, you may have more flexibility than you think—if you insist on dividing groups and explain the reason for it: that you know that children learn best when they have personal attention. I would recommend that every site nurture a volunteer staff. And, I want to add that the best source of new volunteers is the recently retired, from any field. They truly focus on the children; they have knowledge that comes from a lifetime of study; and they are determined to share what they know with the children. They love to get together and learn, share their techniques, ask each other for guidance. They volunteer to do this because they are dedicated to it. All they need is to be invited, encouraged, educated, trusted, and thanked.

They want adventure outside school walls.

Have you been in a school lately and smelled the air? For a child breathing that air day after day, just stepping off a bus and smelling the rich, damp musk of a wetland heralds an adventure. I have often said that science is not fun, in the sense that most people define fun. Shouting wheee... is not a usual, encouraged reaction at Reynolda Gardens. But science in this setting is a different kind of fun—an adventure—in the sense that it is deeply satisfying to learn how nature works. To sit quietly and observe ducks in a pond; to hike through woods and listen to birds in the tops of the trees; to feel the swish of tall meadow grass against your jeans; to garden: loosening the soil, planting a pansy with your partner, holding the watering can and tipping it over together—all of these constitute a great adventure by comparison with their everyday lives. In other words, you don't have to plan a spectacular activity in order to make a child think she has experienced something extraordinary. Just do what you do best. Show the children what you think is interesting. They'll think so, too.

They want you to see them for who they are.

This cannot be repeated often enough: They are children of today, not yesterday. And most of them are not products of the "natural" childhood revival. They do know more facts and have seen more pictures of nature around the world than we did at their age. The "facts" they present to us may seem confused because of the global template of most of their information sources. I can't tell you the number of times I explained why we would not be seeing alligators and monkeys in our woods. Clarification by a knowledgeable adult helps them understand and appreciate the uniqueness of their local environment. Their mistakes should not be taken for lack of sophistication. Information shared with them may be broad, and scientific technicalities may be omitted until they can understand them, but it doesn't have to be simplified. Oversimplification does not serve them well. Because of their broad knowledge, they understand that the world is complex, and they are fascinated with details.

They want to be treated with respect.

If in our eyes, they seem overscheduled (throughout the economic spectrum), they could also be seen as merely fitting a lot into every day. We may regret their lack of downtime, but we have to accept it and fit into their world. All of their activities are planned, from soccer to playdates. They learn from an early age that there is a time for everything and often the time is short. So we must be sure that the activities we plan for them respect their time: that they start and end on time, and pack in as much as possible. But we must also be sure that their intelligence is respected. They have experienced a type of discrimination that is common in childhood, expressed in the condescending attitude of adults who assume that, because they are children, they are intellectually inferior. When planning an activity, I've always thought it's better to plan up, rather than down. The activity, whether it be a hike or a stream study, is most effective when children feel that we think they are as smart as they really are.

They want their own perspectives and boundaries to be respected.

A compromise: We have to give up our own ideas of what constitutes the best way to learn about nature. How you learned may not be the best way for them to learn. A child may or may not want to touch snakes, roll down hills, build structures, put on plays, or get his hands dirty. Children want to be able to opt out. Pressure to participate in hands-on activities can be just as damaging to some children as the lack of it is for others. Fear, embarrassment, and shame are powerful teachers; they can far outweigh the momentary value of completing an activity that they truly don't want to do. For some children, immersion in an activity of their own or their leaders choosing is exactly the right thing to do, but others may not be ready or willing to participate. Yes, a multitude of opportunities of all kinds should be offered, but at the same time we must observe responses very carefully and be cautious with the tender, vulnerable souls, who are entrusted to us so briefly. The effect of our actions, both good and ill as they perceive them, will be with them forever.

They want to know that there is order in the world, that people before them have discovered it, and that it can be understood.

At our sites, we want to cover it all and cover it fast: to share all the knowledge we have gained and thus to help children understand in one fell swoop what we have taken so long to learn. But they are only at the beginning. And further, they may not even know how to begin to learn. In the prior, "natural" childhood, a child might have spent hours watching a line of ants move through the grass. And so that child might have a building block for understanding, for example, soil disturbance or seed distribution by ants. But today's child is more likely to learn about ants by watching a video on tropical ants. It is not the same. It's short and complete, unlike nature in general. So you are the first teacher. And the first thing children need to know is that nature is

not random. If we look closely, together, we can see the parts that make it up. It doesn't matter as much where, as teachers, we choose to begin. But it does matter that children understand that all of nature works together. And that you understand all this, and that they can, too.

They want to understand science. They like to know why and how scientists study the earth and how they recognize, analyze, and solve problems. They like to think of themselves as scientists.

The number one message embedded in learning activities at our sites is that science is for everyone, not just the practicing scientist. It implies a way of thinking about the natural world and begins with close observation. At Reynolda Gardens, leaders encourage every observation that reflects scientific thinking. They encourage children to collect interesting objects along the trails and in the gardens and to organize and classify them for other children to see. They show them how to make their own collections at home. They help children conduct short, simple experiments, which in the hands of older scientists may lead to important conclusions. For example, last summer, the campers conducted an experiment helping scientists at NC State determine the range of ant species. Using nothing more than cookies, index cards, and plastic bags, they discovered an ant that has been unknown in this region. But even if they hadn't, the activity helped them understand that science is really pretty easy to learn and to do—and is endlessly fascinating. Plus, they got to eat the leftover cookies.

They want to help

These can be frightening times for children. They are not protected from adult concerns: they see all the stories of environmental disaster, and they know that when there is talk of leaving a degraded earth to the children, people are talking about them. They are often overwhelmed, and some of them dread the future. We know hollow words of reassurance will not be enough for them because we are truly concerned, too. But in the same way we allay their fears of the unknown nature around them by breaking it down into manageable parts, we can break down knowledge of how the earth has been damaged and we can present solutions—not to everything, but to some things. At least enough to offer some encouragement. Here is one way to do it: The Reynolda Gardens property was once covered with forest, but the land has been changed by multiple strata of human activity. On a walk through the Piedmont ecosystem represented at Reynolda, leaders help children focus on such things as commonalities among species in plant families; learning which animals live in each forest layer; and seeing how wind and water change the contours of the earth. They point out which elements represent nature in its purest form—how it was at one time and how it “ought” to be. Building on this knowledge, children are able to distinguish changes that humans have caused by bringing in invasive plants and animals; fragmenting habitat; and damaging geology. They guide children in thinking about how such problems may be prevented around their homes and neighborhoods. In a very short

time, they come to see how the earth has been harmed by human intervention and what might help it recover in the future. We adults know that the problems the earth faces are bigger than removing English ivy anywhere it is found, but, by breaking the problems into smaller parts, close to home, they become manageable, rather than hopeless.

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We at our sites do not present the beginning or the end of inquiry about nature for every child. But in the spirit of being realistic: We may be the only site they ever visit. Yes. The only site they will ever visit. When they leave, you may think you not have presented the most thorough explanation or that they were not listening. If you give a follow-up test, they may not seem remember anything you told them. You'll never really know what they have learned, felt, or thought about, the rabbits they have chased in their own minds. But I can assure you, they will remember you, and the time they spent with you, and the place you showed them—the fact that you cared enough about the earth and them to be there. Isn't that enough to know for now?