

C U R R I C U L U M

Environmental Education



Young children learn about the world around them by experiencing it

Regardless of where they live, many of our young children spend much of their time in settings or doing activities that keep them essentially isolated from the natural world.

Recreation tends to be indoors (such as watching TV); transportation tends to be by car or other motor vehicle rather than walking; and day care programs—where many children spend most of their waking hours—tend to be oriented more toward the classroom than the outdoors. The result is that many young children are at risk of never developing positive attitudes and feelings toward the natural environment or never

achieving a healthy degree of familiarity with their environment.

Young children learn about the world around them by experiencing it; environmental education begins during the very earliest years of life. Positive experiences play a critical role in shaping lifelong attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior toward natural environments.



Children who are close to nature relate to it as a source of wonder, joy, and awe

Why Is Environmental Education Important For Young Children?

First, children must develop a sense of respect and caring for the natural environment during their first few years of life or be at risk for never developing such attitudes. Second, positive interactions with the natural environment are an important part of healthy child development, and these interactions enhance learning and the quality of life over the span of one's lifetime.

Children who are close to nature relate to it as a source of wonder, joy, and awe. Wonder—rather than books, words, or learning all the facts—provides the direction and impetus for environmental education in early childhood. Environmental education during the early years should be based on this sense of wonder and the joy of discovery.

How Do We Foster Environmental Education With Young Children?

Begin with simple experiences. Young children learn best through experiences that relate to what is already familiar and comfortable. Thus, the best place to start is somewhere they already know. For example, focus on a single tree in a backyard or playground before venturing into another area.

Provide frequent positive experiences outdoors. Because children learn best through direct, concrete experiences, they need to be immersed in the outdoor environment to learn about it. Optimally, the exposure should be provided on an almost daily basis. A one-time trip will have very limited impact on young children. Provide ongoing, simple experiences with trees, plants, birds and insects in environments close to home or school rather than spending time and energy arranging for day trips to unfamiliar places the children may seldom visit.

In addition to investigating the elements of the natural world already present in an outdoor setting, you can use many different strategies to transform a typical playground

into an environmental yard. Start by adding bird feeders, wind socks, flower and vegetable gardens, tree houses, rock piles, and logs. Then, provide children with tools for experimenting and investigating (for example, a magnifying glass, water hose and bucket, hoe, rake).

Focus on “experiencing” rather than “teaching.” Because young children learn through discovery and self-initiated activities, an adult should serve more as a facilitator than a teacher. Learning among young children requires active involvement—hands-on manipulation, sensory engagement, and self-initiated explorations. Young children should not be expected to “watch and listen” for any length of time, nor should they be expected to always follow your lead or agenda. Focus on what children find of interest rather than competing for attention through adult-selected activities and materials.

Demonstrate a personal interest in and enjoyment of the natural world. Your expressions of interest in and enjoyment of the natural world are critical to the child's interest in the environment. Your own sense of wonder, more than your scientific knowledge, will ignite and sustain a child's love of nature. Even adults with limited knowledge can be a very positive influence on children when they share their own enjoyment of being in the natural world. Feelings are more important than facts when introducing young children to the world of nature.

Model caring and respect for the natural environment. Talking to children about taking care of the Earth is far less effective than demonstrating simple ways of expressing care. Care and respect can be modeled by gently handling plants and animals in the classroom, establishing or maintaining outdoor habitats for wildlife, properly disposing of trash, and recycling or reusing as many materials as possible.

Young children often develop an emotional attachment to what is familiar and comfortable to them. If they are to develop a sense of connectedness with the natural world, they need frequent positive experi-



ences with the outdoors. Providing opportunities for such experiences and sharing them with young children is the essence of environmental education. Environmental education for the early years focuses primarily on young children exploring and enjoying the world of nature under the guidance and with the companionship of caring adults.



Adapted from "What Can I Teach My Young Child About The Environment?" at www.KidSource.com

The Iroquois Thanksgiving Address

Ohenton Kariwahtekwen

GREETINGS TO THE NATURAL WORLD

The People. Today we have gathered and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as people. *Now our minds are one.*

The Earth Mother. We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of time. To our mother, we send greetings and thanks. *Now our minds are one.*

The Waters. We give thanks to all the waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms- waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of Water. *Now our minds are one.*

The address goes on to offer thanks to the food plants, the medicine herbs, the animals, the trees, the birds, the four winds, the thunderers, the sun, grandmother moon, the stars, the enlightened creatures, and the Creator. The full text of the address can be found at:

http://www.nativevillage.org/Inspiration-/iroquois_thanksgiving_address.htm

This eloquent prayer of acknowledgement and thanksgiving for all the gifts of the earth is one of the key speeches of the Six Nations Iroquois. It is given to open and close social and religious gatherings in traditional Iroquois communities.

Maybe your community has a tradition like this. Or you might like to write a thanksgiving address with your children and families, using the Iroquois address as an inspiration.

One elementary school had the children write their own address and illustrate it, making it into a beautiful book.

