

EDITOR: **ROB McCORMICK**
745-4641 ext. 244 / fax 743-4581
life@peterboroughexaminer.com

LIVING

Connecting with kids

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that, for most of us, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood.

Rachel Carson,
A Sense of Wonder

Two weeks ago, I began a discussion of how to best encourage the innate interest in nature that all young children have, so that it will grow into a lifelong environmental ethic.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

However, as Canadian artist Robert Bateman observes, "we live in a society where youth recognize 1,200 corporate logos and fewer than 12 species of wildlife found in their communities."

This week, I'd like to suggest some ways in which parents and especially teachers can help to cultivate a connection in kids with the natural world around them, so that our plant and animal neighbours eventually become as familiar as the golden arches of McDonald's.

As far as our schools are concerned, there is encouraging news. In June, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a report on environmental education that was prepared by an expert panel chaired by scientist and astronaut Roberta Bondar. It includes a comprehensive set of recommendations to strengthen environmental learning in the formal curriculum. Among other things, it emphasizes outdoor education as a distinct and vital component of environmental education, and highlights the need for hands-on, experiential learning to foster a connection to local places and a greater understanding of ecosystems. How schools and individual teachers will be supported in this recommendation still waits to be seen.

Because of the myriad demands on a teacher's time, it can be a challenge to take a class outside to visit natural areas on a regular basis. Therefore, a number of the activities that I'm going to propose can be done by the students on their own time. Others are very short and can take as little as 10 minutes outside before or after recess, for example, or during outdoor physical education. The activities tap into things that kids love to do, such as drawing, searching and collecting.

Almost without exception, kids love to draw, and drawing is a wonderful way of enhancing observation skills. So, at the beginning of the year, I teach the children how to start and keep an ongoing nature journal. Nature journaling is simply the regular recording in words and drawings of observations, perceptions, and even feelings about nearby nature such as school grounds, local parks, and backyard habitats.

Using a medium-size, coil bound sketch pad, the children start each entry by recording the location, date, time, approximate temperature and weather conditions. They then proceed to draw the object or scene that has caught their attention. They also include short, explanatory notes about what they are drawing. These could include references to colour, behaviour, sound, species name (if known), and questions that come to mind. At the outset, I tell the kids that they are scientists, not artists, and not to get caught up on the idea of "I can't draw." This helps to keep

Tips and techniques for parents and teachers to help make children more aware of the natural world around them



A page from a nature journal by Hannah Taylor, a Grade 6 student at Edmison Heights Public School. For children, a nature journal fosters self-learning and becomes a whole new way of seeing the world around them.

the activity as anxiety-free as possible. Over the course of the year, the drawing skills do improve and can be addressed from time to time during art lessons. Nature journaling also helps to improve their writing skills, since the writing is personal and for a purpose.

For the children, the nature journal fosters self-learning and becomes a whole new way of seeing the world around them. It is also very much a tool for a personal connection with the natural world. It creates a wonderful "memory record" that kids can return to in the future. The journal is something that can be brought along on walks, class trips, activities in the schoolyard, and even family vacations or weekends away. Most drawing sessions are only five or 10 minutes in length, and are usually done before or after some other activity such as outdoor physical education. Sometimes, however, we collect objects while on a walk and draw them

indoors for longer periods. The nature journal is also available for children to use on their own when they so desire.

A similar idea to the nature journal is having the children keep a photographic record of some of their observations. Using a digital camera is enjoyable and a great motivator. Sometimes I provide them with a list of things to photograph over a given period of time, while other times they are free to take pictures of whatever they like. The pictures are printed, placed in an album, and accompanied by some brief notes including date, location, weather conditions, species, and any additional information of interest. If you have access to a digital projector, the pictures can easily become a class "slide show" for school assemblies such as Earth Day. Each student in turn can come forward and say a few words about his or her pictures.

To make children more aware of seasonal change, I also give my students a "nature

sheet" of things to look out for and record each month. The sheets are based on happenings in nature that are relatively easy to observe, even within the city in most cases. They include such things as sunrise and sunset times, bird species coming to the feeder, bird songs, finding and identifying specific plants, and watching the night sky for a given planet or constellations. There is also a section for the child's own discoveries.

In February, for example, the list includes listening for the return of the cardinal's song, observing crow courtship behaviour, witnessing squirrels chasing each other as mating time has arrived, finding and identifying the dead flower heads of last summer, watching for snow fleas, observing the five constellations that circle Orion, and even keeping their noses on the ready for the smell of a skunk.

Although some prior teaching is involved, the sheets are not terribly time intensive. At the end of the month, they are collected, evaluated and returned. Since it's difficult to observe everything, the evaluation is mostly based on the effort made. We then discuss the sheets and the kids share stories about their discoveries that month. Finding the items on the sheet often ends up becoming a family outing and, from the feedback I receive, is often as much fun for the adults as for the kids.

Simply encouraging kids to bring plants, animals and other nature-related items into class from time to time is another easy way to encourage an interest in nature. My students sometimes even arrive with a dead bird that has hit a window. This always makes for an interesting discussion.

These items, along with interesting things we find on walks or class trips, can become part of an ongoing classroom display or "nature table." It provides a kind of a visual calendar of the season at hand. If time permits, the items should be labelled, dated, and include the child's name. The display can also include several more permanent objects such as live plants, an aquarium with a class pet, magnifying glasses and field guides.

Some years, I've also brought in small pizza boxes in which the children keep their discoveries. The collections have included everything from goldenrod galls and pine cones to feathers and egg shells. Because kids, and many adults for that matter, have a natural inclination toward collecting things, these collections prove quite popular with many children.

The schoolyard can be a wonderful resource for nature-based activities. It's amazing how much of interest can be found just in an overgrown patch of grass, along a hedgerow, or by closely observing trees. One activity that kids love is "adopting" their own schoolyard or neighbourhood tree, giving it a name, and recording how it changes over the course of the year. Some schools, such as Edmison Heights, where I teach, have also been involved in projects to naturalize parts of the playground by planting trees and shrubs. This creates habitat for birds and insects, while at the same time providing an outdoor classroom for students and a quiet place to go at recess. This is a topic that I'll return to in a future column.

Finally, the local neighbourhood and parks are sources of nearby nature that should be kept in mind. One way to use these areas on a regular basis is through the daily physical activity component of the curriculum. An easy activity is to simply do 15 minutes of fast-paced walking in the neighbourhood with the class. You can easily add a nature focus such as how many birds the kids can see during the walk or how many different types of leaves they can pick up. Five minutes of sketching can be added on at the end as a cool-down before heading back.

Next week, I'll write about some of the more formal outdoor education opportunities available in the Peterborough area.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his web-site at www.drewmonkman.com.