

Children are Little Scientists

by Tim Seldin

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Children have an inbuilt drive for discovery. Encourage your child to observe the world and to feel a sense of wonder for everything in it. Maria Montessori believed that all children behave like “little scientists” in that they are eager to observe and make “what if” discoveries about their world. Infants and toddlers test the environment to see what happens when, for example, they drop a toy out of their highchair or play with the water in their bath. This drive for discovery continues to develop as they grow and become more adventurous in the things that they try out, from making mud pies in the garden to starting a worm farm in the living room. Children are born with marvelous imaginations and a keen desire to explore the world. Encourage this in your child—help her to discover the beauty and wonder of everything around her.

Child’s eye view

Remember that your child’s world is up close and low to the ground. Seeing life from her point of view can help you to rediscover the sense of wonder of a young child. Keep in mind the slow moving pace of her world. Follow your child’s lead, and be prepared to stop and examine anything that captures her interest—a ladybug or a flower, for example. Don’t get impatient when she dawdles—adjust to her pace. The best way for children to learn is by doing things, not by being told about them. This is especially true when they are young, but it also applies to older children and even adults. When children are young, they are not only learning things, they are learning how to learn. No book using words and illustrations to describe the world that exists around a small brook or under a rotting log can replace the value of spending time closely studying the real thing. Books and other materials help children to pull these powerful impressions and experiences together in their minds, but the foundation needs to be laid in direct observation and hands-on experience.

The outdoor world

Children love to be outdoors, wandering around, climbing trees, picking berries, and collecting pinecones. They enjoy helping to look after the family garden or feeding small animals such as ducks, rabbits, and chickens. They form lifelong memories of days spent hiking with their parents in the woods, playing in a creek, and walking along a beach looking for shells.

You will probably begin your child’s life outdoors by taking her out for little excursions in her stroller or carrying her on your back. Take time to introduce her to your world. Even very young infants absorb the sights and sounds of the outdoors—clouds passing overhead, the sight and smell of flowers in the garden, the wind rustling the leaves in the trees. All these leave a strong and lasting impression. Whether it is summer, fall, spring,

or winter, every season has its own beauty. Point out small things: a tiny flower poking up through the snow, a beautiful shell, a perfect leaf. As your child gets older, begin to point out familiar things as you walk around. “Look, there's Grandma’s house! What lovely flowers she has growing outside her door!” or “My goodness, Mary, can you see the nest those birds have built in the tree? Some day they will lay eggs, and they will have baby birds up there!” In the winter, when you see animal tracks in the fresh snow, ask, “Who has been walking here?”

Stewards of the planet

Another key Montessori idea is that children are stewards of the Earth and must learn to care for distant places such as rainforests and ice caps as well as pockets of nature within the city or suburbs, and to preserve them for the future. Teach your children a reverence for life. After all, we are all part of the web of life, dependent on the delicate balance within the natural world for our own existence. For example, children often learn to think of the soil as “dirt,” a word that implies something nasty to many people. Teach them to respect good, rich soil and all the life that it supports on our planet.

Emphasize the need to treat every living thing with care. Teach your child not to pick leaves and flowers aimlessly then toss them aside, but to gather them only for a good purpose. It is OK occasionally to gather wild flowers, then dry or press them or place them in a vase with water to preserve them for as long as possible, but never over-pick any one plant or flower. Teach your child to walk gently upon the Earth, taking only what she needs.

Encourage your child to enjoy the forest and meadows, leaving nothing behind. Teach her never to litter. If you see trash on the ground, pick it up and carry it with you until it can be thrown away. This is especially true of bottles, broken glass, cans, and plastic bags, which are not only unsightly but also could harm animals. To gather up cans and broken glass safely, you might carry an old canvas shoulder bag. As your child gets older, give her a bag of her own to collect trash in, too.

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