



Fear Not!

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“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” Dr. Suess’s *Lorax* puts responsibility for fixing the world’s environmental problems squarely on the shoulders of the younger generation after their elders made a lot of bad choices. But is this where the onus belongs?

Too often, young children are taught about environmental problems that adults created and cannot seem to fix. “Maybe THEY’LL fix it” we think, hoping these children will grow to find solutions we could not. Imagine how an eight year old might feel about this, being at the mercy of authorities who can’t get things right.

Since ecological problem-solving requires abstract thinking, even the most empowered young learner will come up with over-simplified answers. The thing is, *private* actions don’t solve our most pressing environmental issues unless combined with political engagement for collective *public* action. Environmental solutions depend on the cooperation of many stakeholders, the outcomes are often uncertain, and change can take years.

We humans use coping strategies such as denial and psychological distancing to reduce our anxiety when faced with really complicated issues. The greater the size and complexity of the problem, the more likely we are to do nothing at all.

This is why David Sobel, author of *Beyond Ecophobia*, recommends a policy of “no tragedies before 4th grade.” Citing studies of children who feel anxious, sad, frustrated, hopeless, angry, and scared about the future after being exposed to “doom and gloom”, he and other child development specialists have the following advice about best practices for developmentally appropriate environmental curricula:

Early Childhood (Preschool- 4th grade)

In early childhood, focus on empathy and enjoyment of the natural world. Observe and ask questions about the animals and plants present in your schoolyard. Have children help you care for the pet snake in the classroom. Give children lots of time to fall in love with nature and to become comfortable in natural settings. Sit on the lawn for lunch. Study ants and other schoolyard invertebrates and imagine life from their perspective. Investigate weather, comparing data on clouds and rainfall in different parts of your school grounds. Count how many different kinds of bird songs you can hear. Catch, tag, and release monarchs passing through the schoolyard in early fall. Look for caterpillars in spring, while focusing on life cycles. Discuss what butterflies need to live (milkweed, nectar plants) without being a “Debbie Downer” by discussing their dwindling populations.

Middle Childhood (5th – 7th grade)

In middle childhood, focus on exploring the natural world. A good rule of thumb might be to spend at least as much time outdoors observing and appreciating nature with your class as you do indoors telling them about problems that need solving. If you focus on problems and action, make it the kind that students can actually experience and work on locally. One study of empowered students attributed their success to the fact that their commitment was authentic, based on first-hand experiences, and utilizes real places on a manageable scale. Choose one small corner of the schoolyard and install plants for pollinators to gather nectar. Study the interactions of organisms in your schoolyard and look for patterns of behavior. Without getting into heavier issues of the regret of lost species, spend some time improving the habitat for the animals in your schoolyards, neighborhoods or homes.

Early Adolescence (8th – 12th grade)

In early adolescence, teachers can focus more heavily on social action. Since actions speak louder than words, teachers should model the kind of classroom where collaborative decision-making helps students practice working together, and where differences of opinion are respectfully discussed and valued. Help students analyze and divide big problems into smaller pieces so they can plan for achievable goals. As children get older, they can handle complex problems and take on more responsibility. Maybe it's time to start a letter writing campaign or even show up at a planning meeting at a local municipality to discuss ways to improve local wildlife habitat.

Too often, as Shakespeare wrote in the *Merchant of Venice*, “the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children”. Teachers have a special responsibility to help children grow in their awareness of environmental issues with the emotional and cognitive skills to cope. Above all, we must love nature as children, as adults, and throughout our lives. Take your class outside today and start making those connections!

Sources:

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