

Nature and Mirror Stories: the science curriculum

Since the young child learns most deeply through story and activity, Nature Stories, outdoor time, and nature projects together make up our science curriculum all the way through Grade Two. The heart of this curriculum is the Nature Story as it weaves together his experience of the natural world and empowers his perception.

For the young child, the heart of science lies in the awe-filled connection to the ecosystems of our lives. Whether he is helping turn the compost, reveling in the worms on the sidewalk, picking peas from the garden, or just watching the rain fall, it is the simple, ordinary participation in the natural world of his daily life that is the ground of all else. Taking time for the child to experience these things deeply supports the natural gift of early childhood: complete absorption in life.

It is in this complete absorption that he experiences the reality of the ecosystem of which we are a part. In Enki, we see this as the singly most important science learning of our lives – without it, our power to create and destroy is unmoored and we will not see the full impact of our choices. Therefore, in the Enki approach we look to support and stabilize the child's experience of connectedness as home-base; story is key to this undertaking.

All children come into the world with this rich connectedness, but in the course of growing up, especially in the modern world, this connection is easy to lose. Through the Enki Nature Stories we bring images of the *living processes* of the natural world to the child. Everyday phenomena, from the turning of the seasons to the mice underfoot, to the colors of sunset, come to life in all their majesty. The child's perception of the magic in the ordinary - seeing "the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower"¹ - is strengthened.

Because young children are still deeply connected to the inter-weavings of the world around them, to try to educate them through conceptual understanding would pull them out of their sense of wholeness. For young children a conceptual or analytic understanding of nature actually blocks the deep understanding or sense of reverence we seek to "educate."²

The Kindergartner is still well nourished by the Home and Garden picture books of his preschool years, and we recommend reading these stories for as long as the child is nourished by them (*suggestions in the Early Childhood Guides*). But at this point in his development the kindergartner also needs stories that reflect some of the tension and challenge he is experiencing as he becomes a more independent individual – such tensions and challenges are an inherent part of nature's cycles.

¹ From *Auguries of Innocence*, by William Blake

² See Foundations II/Mirroring Child Development/the young child

In the Enki approach, Nature Stories highlight a particular characteristic, phenomenon, or process of nature, in living images. The reason for telling them is three-fold:

1. **We want to nourish and deepen the children's natural connection to, delight in, and reverence for the natural world AS IT IS.** More often than not, these stories will highlight the natural ecology or cycling aspects of nature. That in itself is awe-inspiring and very comforting.

By rousing the children's awareness (experiential, *not* conceptual awareness), we feed the capacity for looking at, noticing, and being touched by the natural world. For example, the dandelions that had been nothing but a nuisance in Daddy's lawn are delighted in as they turn their golden, round faces toward the sun and roar. Or the first chill of Autumn is part of Duchess Autumn's secret whisper, and not a dreaded end of summer. All of life is seen in its own right and with its own value. These imaginative stories encourage the children to notice the energetic relationships all around them and the children's part in them, in a way that more factual, analytic, or conceptual stories and activities would not.

2. **These stories expose the child to rich and rhythmic language for describing everyday matters of their world.** Often the child will begin describing the natural phenomena he notices in poetic terms, strengthening language arts skills.
3. **These stories tell of natural phenomena that display the energy the children experience in themselves.** Has anyone had hotter, more forceful anger than a volcano? Do our tears fall harder than the pounding rain? Is our confusion greater than the twisting tornado? This is one type of non-personal story that lets the children experience the fact that the many forces in them, the many rising and falling emotions and drives, are part of natural life, displayed all the time in the natural world. They can also experience the cycling and resolution of that particular energy. No storm lasts forever, all fire leaves fertile ash. Each of these destructive forces has its purifying or nourishing aspect, too.

In these stories the child not only experiences the universality of his own range of emotions, he also has a safe place to explore and experience those less familiar to him – the fiery rage of one child, the timid wilt of another, the relentless busyness of a third. Each one is experienced within the circle of life. We hope that these stories will help the children be able to experience their emotional ups and downs with less distress and more sense of being part of life.

The common thread in the Enki Nature Stories is that they are “true” – they are not a disguise or manipulation for other purposes. “True” means two things: first, that they describe real phenomena; and second, that they describe real energy. The actual events need not have happened for the energy and science to be described in living pictures. As long as the nature science stays accurate, the story itself can be purely imaginative. For the young child, who perceives energy as a being/body, it is usually best to let the natural phenomenon express itself as a being (*Old Man Winter, The Crystal Queen, Night Magic, Old Mother Rain Cloud, etc.*).

In order to support the child’s innate connection to the magic of the world around him, we recommend using primarily those stories which tell of the world in which he is living. So, while an occasional story about the snow falling may help the kindergartner living in the Southwestern United States make a lively connection to a larger world, for the most part it is best to tell him stories that deepen his connection to his everyday world. For example, Old Mother Raincloud may be a winter story in his area; the summer stories in this collection may be more appropriate to his spring, and so on. The stories in this collection work with the northern four seasons, but many can be easily adapted to other climates and vegetation. For example, Old Maple (maple sugaring in winter) can be the prototype for a Southwestern story about Grandfather Pinon and the collection of pinon nuts, or in the Southeast it might be Grandmother Orange bearing fruit just before an unusual frost. The Magic Purse (purslane in summer) can serve as a prototype for a Southwestern story of agave or prickly pear; stories of the reds and oranges of a Northeastern autumn can be easily modified the golds of the Rocky Mountain Aspen, and so on. The goal, however one accomplishes it, is to use these stories to offer the child a living connection to the ordinary events of the natural world around him.

Nature Stories are not “teaching tales” in the sense of telling the children how they should relate to and take care of the natural world. Rather, we are bringing the children an experience of a given nature phenomenon in its most pristine and awe-inspiring form; we do not tell them how they *should* relate to it. **In the Enki Approach, we lean away from telling the children how they *should* feel. Rather, we seek to bring them into a deeper relationship with their world, trusting the deep ethics naturally born of that connectedness.**

For now, stories of pollution, destruction, and the like will frighten the children and cause them to pull back from the immediacy of their natural reverence for and connection to the world. Many years down the road, when the children are well anchored in reverence for nature and hold a deep trust in its cycles, we will bring them information on its destruction. Even with the difficulty this brings, the deeply seated reverence for and connection to nature

fostered in these early years will offer a base for their ecological activities.

Certainly they can join in the activities of ecology from their earliest years – joining in composting, garbage pick-up, planting trees, and the like – but for now it is an experience of giving life we are after, not the experience of fighting the big, bad world. On this base, when they are old enough to take an active part in political activities and caring for their world, a more analytic look at the challenges facing nature today will be empowering.

Young children may well be able to voice concern and echo their parents' political views, but in the end this will undermine their ability to fully open to nature and carry it in their hearts and souls. **True compassion for our world must begin with a simple and deep love of the natural phenomena all around us, in all their beauty.**

In the Resource Libraries we offer three types of nature stories, each with its own gifts:

- 1) The Legend: These are stories of magical events that lead to a phenomenon. *Legend of the Lady Slipper* and *The Fiddler of the Northern Lights* are examples;
- 2) The quasi-Fairy Tale: these are stories which follow the quasi-Fairy Tale format, but which have nature science as a central driving principle. *The Gift of the Mighty Oak* and *Water Shoots* are examples;
- 3) The Manifestation of Energy: These are the stories in which the energies of nature are given body or form. *Night Magic*, *The Crystal Queen*, and *Princess Spring* are examples.

Children today also seem to need quite a bit of help with the nature imagery, particularly within the nature stories. Along with the fact that these stories move more slowly with less action than the Folk Tales, they require a deeper “settling in” to connect with the purely energetic phenomena. This “settling in” is an important part of the educational process for the kindergartner. Still, it can be supportive of this process to show high quality pictures, *AFTER* the sleep cycle. Even one or two pictures you create or find and print can help ground the children enough to sink in more fully.

Nature Story Science for the Teacher

At the end of each nature story you will find a description of the nature science relevant to that particular story. **This is not intended for the children in any way** – not as discussion material, nor as factual baggage. For the children, it is the sinking into the living experience the story offers that gives them grounding in a reverential and thus ecological science. Still, it is helpful for the teacher to know what the scientific aspects of the story are so that any changes, expansions, or deletions she may make for her particular listeners do not violate any

“nature truths.” For example, working with the Mighty Oak story, you might want to have all the trees join in protecting the child. That would violate the truth – all but oak and sycamore lose all their leaves at some point. Or you might want to make Old Maple into a young giver, but in fact they have to be about 40 years old before the right sap flows. So the teacher knowing the science matters!

Mirror Stories

When stories are chosen or created as nature stories they are simply a reintroduction to our world and ourselves, one which reconnects us to the wholeness of our world and to the cyclic/ ecological quality – the wonder of nature. However, we can also use these as specific mirror stories, stories chosen to reflect a specific individual or group challenge. By reflecting where the child *is*, we validate her experience and free her to find her own resolution and growth within the struggle. **These stories are NOT parables.** We do not “use” the natural phenomena to give a message and a cure. We simply connect with nature’s expression of that energy and tell the story of its cycle.

For the kindergartners we begin and end these stories with the phenomenon at rest because that is “home-base.” However, the point of the story is not the resolution, but rather our willingness to open to, identify with, and invoke the very energy that the children are struggling with. This is what frees them to their own process of learning and growth. **The simple pictorial expression of our willingness to be present with whatever arises, is an expression of our trust in the natural unfolding of life.** If we use these stories to “teach” or manipulate the children for a particular outcome, we will have undermined the whole process.

Mirror stories can be very powerful and leave the children with images that extend far past the telling. The great wonder in our mirror stories is that we find true phenomena that mirror our human experience. That in itself is healing. What could be more healing than experiencing ourselves as being completely within the flow of nature and knowing that all energies have a place in the great unfolding of life? You may explode like a volcano or weep like the rain, but you are still part of life.

These stories offer the adult the opportunity *and the challenge* of stepping into the energy around and within her without any agenda other than knowing that energy intimately. When the child is seen and welcomed by the adult in this non-personal way, it builds a trust in himself and with the adult to last a lifetime.

Sometimes the mirror stories created for individual situations are created in the moment and are often told only once. After taking the time to welcome the child and the problem – usually working with Acceptance Meditation practice (S.A.G.E)³ – the teacher identifies a few images that she feels connect with the situation. She begins by describing the nature situation and follows that wherever it goes, often discovering aspects she may not otherwise have been consciously aware of. But she is *not* making a point; she is perceiving nature’s parallel and trusting that to tell its own story and do its own healing.

See Foundations II/The Teacher/S.A.G.E. Practice, and Teacher’s Workbook/ S.A.G.E. Practice,