

Children Nature and You

Plant a Seed, Grow a Reader: *Sowing the Seeds of Learning*

A two hour workshop
For parents, grandparents, teachers, caregivers and all those who love and
influence the lives of young children



Written and Created by

Diane Gordon

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a program of
Hooked on Nature**

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Plant a Seed, Grow a Reader: *Sowing the Seeds of Learning* **A Personal Introduction**

I created and am offering the following Children, Nature and You workshop guide, **Plant a Seed, Grow a Reader: *Sowing the Seeds of Learning***, together with resource materials, in the hope that you will be inspired to take it, study it, adapt it, and make it your own.

I am specifically calling this a *guide* and not a *curriculum* because I have discovered through many years of working with both adults and children that it is not information that brings a presentation to life, but the passion, personal experiences and depth of understanding of the presenter that has the ability to inspire.

This particular workshop came about because of a growing concern I was hearing from early childhood professionals. More and more they were telling me how they were feeling pressured by society to bring what had always been considered a first grade curriculum, with its emphasis on specific reading and math skills and more formalized learning, into the preschool. Play, especially outdoor play, and the simple joys of discovering the world of nature were taking a back seat to work papers, seatwork and memorization.

Through my own training and experience as a kindergarten and preschool teacher and my many years of introducing first my children, then my grandchildren to the joys, awe and wonder of the natural world I know that simple nature experiences, shared with caring, loving adults, are an essential element in a child's physical, intellectual, social and spiritual development. Through stories, experiences, videos and carefully researched resource materials my goal has always been to help others see that Nature is as important a teacher as parents and educators.

I have presented this workshop to parents, early childhood educators and other interested adults many times, and each time is different. Every participant brings their own life experiences and stories to the table and at each workshop I learn something new that then gets added to the next presentation. I'm sure it will be the same for you.

To help you I have provided a series of resource materials as handouts for workshop participants, links to videos and informational resources that may be helpful to you as a workshop facilitator, and instructions for setting up a seed planting activity.

I hope you have as much fun with this material as I have had. Remember, the words I have written are mine. Change them, add to them, and make them your own. And please let me know how it goes - you can email me at www.diane@childrennatureandyou.org

"Children have a natural affinity towards nature. Dirt, water, plants, and small animals attract and hold children's attention for hours, days, even a lifetime."

Robin C. Moore and Herb H Wong

Thank you,
Diane Gordon, Director of Children, Nature and You

Children, Nature and You

www.childrenandnature.org

Inspiration and Education: Resources for Presenters

There are certain things I like to do before any presentation to remind myself of *why* I do what I do, and I thought it would be helpful to share them with you.

I take time to reacquaint myself with Rachel Carson and her beautiful book "The Sense of Wonder." I revisit Richard Louv's "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" to remind myself again of the importance of connecting children with Nature. I visit the Children and Nature Network's website www.childrenandnature.org for the latest information and research.

There are certain articles that I always return to, especially anything that comes from the White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group www.whitehutchinson, or is written by Robin C. Moore and Gilda Cosco with the Natural Learning Initiative www.naturalearning.org.

If I have the opportunity to spend time outdoors with children, so much the better!

I like to arrive early at a workshop site so I can have time alone outdoors, taking in the simple beauty of the sky, the trees, and the weather. There are so many things I can tell participants to look for and listen to as they leave at the end of the workshop - a new moon, spectacular clouds, crickets in the long grass, leaves crunching underfoot. Even the barest of sites have a view of the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars.

Finally, I collect things - unusual seedpods, a feather from a blue jay, a story about the raccoons who visit my small garden. And I collect other people's stories, memories and experiences with nature, all to be shared as appropriate with workshop participants.

Under **Presenter Resources** you will find two excellent video clips: An slide presentation of [Children in Nature](#) created by the Working Forum on Education for Young Children and "[Earth's Children](#)" excerpted from the DVD "Images for Reflection" available from Hooked on Nature. You have permission to use both these beautiful video presentations. To get your own copy, contact [Children, Nature and You](#).

In addition please browse the resource sections of this Children, Nature and You website www.childrenatureandyou.org. These resources were all chosen to help YOU in YOUR journey of inspiring others in introducing children to the joy, awe and wonder of Nature. You will no doubt have your own special sources of education and inspiration, and I would love to hear about them.

There are Participant Resources on the website. These are handouts that you may want to give to all the participants in your workshop.

Thank You,
Diane Gordon

Plant a Seed, Grow a Reader: *Sowing the Seeds of Learning*

Workshop Agenda Main Points

- * Welcoming Remarks**

- * Workshop Rationale**

- * Nature as Teacher**

- * Kindergarten Readiness and Nature's Lessons**

- * Plant a Seed: Grow a Reader**

- * Brain Development:**

- * Health Benefits**

- * Sharing Ideas**

- * Summary and Close**

Plant a Seed, Grow a Reader: *Sowing the Seeds of Learning* Workshop Guidelines

Welcoming Remarks

As well as welcoming participants I often conduct what I have called a "Bubble Fest." After making sure everyone has a small bottle of bubble liquid (I use the small ones available in the wedding supplies section at most craft stores) I get everyone up on their feet, blowing bubbles. This is a great ice-breaker for appropriate audiences and is an example of the kind of simple nature experiences addressed in the workshop.

Workshop Rationale

There is tremendous pressure both on parents and educators today for children to do well in school, excel in tests, get into the right schools, etc. - pressure which is reaching down even into the preschool. As a former kindergarten teacher this troubles me, because all too often doing well translates as "Sit still and listen, and then give me back the right answers." And this is NOT how children learn, and this is NOT true education. Where is the joy in discovery, the thrill of learning something exciting and new, and where is the creativity?

And where is the opportunity for exuberant, joyful unstructured play that has been the birthright of generations of children?

Yes, our children do need to succeed in school, and there *are* facts to be learned, information to be absorbed and skills to be mastered, but for the young child there is another way - a more developmentally sound way - Nature's way.

By allowing young children simple outdoor experiences and the opportunity to "just play" we are not only laying the groundwork for intellectual and social growth, but we will also be addressing a growing concern about our children's physical health - what some are calling a growing epidemic of childhood obesity and diabetes.

This is what the rest of our time together is going to be about - brain development, how the young child learns and develops, and how experiences in Nature with caring and enthusiastic adults impact a child's all-round health and development. Because we *do* want our children to be ready for kindergarten, we will also see how these same experiences build pre-reading and pre-kindergarten skills;

We will explore this through hands-on experiences, children's stories and story books, videos, and sharing our own stories - and that's where we're going to begin.

Nature as Teacher

Say: Take a minute to think about a time, maybe when you were about the same age as your child is now, when you experienced the wonder of this Earth's beauty. Then turn to a neighbor and share your story.

*(Give examples. You will find a sample of stories and memories that workshop participants have shared in the **Stories and Memories** resource files.)*

Ask: Who would like to tell their story to the group? *(Hear as many as time allows.)*

Discussion: Why are these stories so important? Why have they remained in our memory?

(They have shaped us. They have taught us lessons that have stayed with us throughout our lives. Draw examples from the stories the participants have just told as each story will offer an opportunity to informally point out some of Nature's lessons.)

Importance of personal stories: These personal stories are *living* stories to be shared with the children in our lives. They are part of family history and family folklore. They connect children with something bigger than themselves and excite their curiosity.

Listening to stories is also an important pre-reading skill. Children have to create their own pictures in their imagination. Without this skill they may be able to read words on a page, but they will not be able to understand what they are reading.

(Personal note. I have worked for many years teaching adults to read. It has been interesting to discover that most of them have not learned to imagine pictures - create a "movie" in their minds. As they learn to do this so they improve their reading comprehension skills.)

Say: To help understand how children learn through experience it is good to take time to observe them. We are going to watch a video - Earth's Children, in which we will see children, both human and animal, doing what comes naturally to them. As you watch, ask yourself what life skills are being learned as these children play.

Show appropriate video/DVD of Children in Nature.
(I show **Earth's Children** from Images for Reflection (DVD) .
Details are in the **Presenter Resource** materials.

Ask for responses and discuss together. Recall specific incidents and what was happening: large muscle control, small muscle development, spatial awareness, caring for others, cooperation and sharing, imagination, creativity, numerical skills, observation skills, etc.

This is how the young child learns. PLAY IS THE CHILD'S WORK.

Kindergarten Readiness and Nature's Lessons

As a young child approaches her/his fourth birthday many parents become anxious about preparation for kindergarten and what is needed. They become concerned about reading and math and what *they* should be doing. In response to these concerns I wrote the following piece, which is also a handout in the **Participant Resources** section.

What to Teach a Child

When I was a young kindergarten teacher, prospective parents would ask me what they could do to prepare their children for kindergarten, expecting I would give them a list of reading and math exercises. As I look back now, I can see that my responses were vague and far from satisfactory. Now, these many years later, I would say something like this:

They will need to know their colors - the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the colors of the rainbow. And numbers. Count with them: the squirrels in the park, the petals on a flower, how many acorns can be held in one hand, in two hands.

Share with them the wonder and the beauty of the world around them -the sliver of the moon that grows night by night until it is full and round. The snail that travels with his house on his back, and leaves a silvery trail wherever he goes. Or the spider who spins beautiful, intricate patterns overnight.

Encourage them to be creative and different. Walk in the mud together with bare feet. Howl at the moon like wolves. Wiggle or slide through the grass like worms or snails.

Teach them tenderness as they gently stroke a kitten, or pick up a worm after the rain, and replace it carefully in the soil. Encourage their sense of responsibility as you plant seeds together and tend them regularly.

Teach them to read - to read the weather and tell if it will be windy or rainy today. Or to read the world around them - the changing colors of the leaves, the many kinds of seeds, the many colors of flowers.

Introduce them to the magic of stories, both listening to them and telling them. Let their imagination soar.

Do this, and I can teach them to read!

Created by Diane Gordon for Children, Nature and You

Follow this by introducing **Kindergarten Readiness and Nature's Lessons for Kindergarten Readiness** from the **Participant Resources** segment. Give people opportunity to read it and respond. Recall some of the personal stories participants shared at the beginning of the workshop, linking them to activities listed in **Nature's Lessons for Kindergarten Readiness**.

Plant a Seed: Grow a Reader. Sowing the Seeds of Learning

Say: We have *talked* about the importance of experience. We have seen a video about the importance of experience. We have had the opportunity to look at some of the specific skills that will help your child be ready for kindergarten. Now it is time for us to *do* something! You now have the opportunity to be a kid again - to get your hands into the dirt, plant a seed and then take it home to watch it grow.

See [Plant a Seed Activity Instructions](#) (Presenter Resources).

Pull everyone together. Ask them what simple pre-school/pre-kindergarten skills were involved as they worked together - talking with each other (building communication and vocabulary skills); counting, awareness of shapes and capacity (different sizes of scoops and spoons); colors (red scoop or blue spoon); sharing; taking turns and working together; following instructions and sequencing, etc.

Talk about how an experience as simple as planting and growing a seed helps a child's pre-math, pre-reading, pre-science skills. Then brainstorm follow-up experiences, such as caring for the newly planted seed, anticipating the first signs of growth, watching the seed grow day by day, drawing a picture record of the plant's growth, etc.

Say: You can further develop your child's pre-reading skills by telling or reading related stories. I tell the following story - one I told over and over again when I was teaching kindergarten - and refer back to the earlier discussion about the importance of allowing children to create their own pictures in their minds as they listen to stories.

The Turnip Seed (a traditional folktale)

Once upon a time, there was a little old man who loved his garden. Every spring he carefully planted corn seeds, and pepper seeds and tomato seeds, and every summer he and his family enjoyed wonderful meals of corn and peppers and tomatoes.

But one spring he found a strange new seed in his collection - one he had never seen before. He showed it to his wife. "My" she said. "I do believe you have a turnip seed. Plant it carefully and when it is good and big I will make turnip soup."

So the little old man found a special space amongst his tomatoes, and corn and peppers, and planted his turnip seed. He made sure it got plenty of sunshine, and just enough water. And he watched it grow, until at last he was quite sure it was time to harvest his turnip. It had tall strong leaves, and if he pushed his finger into the earth he could feel the turnip - firm and big and round.

He took hold of the tall green leaves and he pulled... and he pulled... and he pulled... But he couldn't pull up the turnip.

So he called his wife. She came running out, put her hands around her husband's waist, and her husband took hold of the tall green leaves, and they pulled... and they pulled... and they pulled... But they couldn't pull up the turnip.

So they called their grandson. He came running out, put his hands around his grandmother's waist, she put her hands around her husband's waist, and he took hold of the tall green leaves and they pulled... and they pulled... and they pulled... But they couldn't pull up the turnip.

So they called the little granddaughter. She came running out, and put her hands around her brother's waist. He put his hands around his grandmother's waist, she put her hands around her husband's waist, and he took hold of the tall green leaves and they pulled... and they pulled... and they pulled... And *whoosh*. Up came the biggest turnip you have ever seen. It was so big they all had to put their hands around it to carry it into the kitchen.

There the grandmother chopped, and she sliced, and she cooked the turnip. She put in corn, and peppers, and tomatoes, and at last they all sat down and had a delicious dinner of Turnip Soup.

The End

Say: There are so many books that children love to have read to them over and over again, and one of the simplest and the best is *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss

Read *The Carrot Seed* and show the pictures.

Ask: What are other ways to follow up on planting activities? Brainstorm together. Explore how *they* can make up seed-growing stories with their children and how they can encourage children to create *their* own stories.

This is a good time to talk about the importance of imagination and "lets pretend" or fantasy play. At around 3 - 4 years the child is entering a period of rich creative and imaginative play. This is a time of imaginary friends and "let's pretend." This is the time when the child is developing the creative abilities he will draw on for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, this is also the time when academic pressure enters the life of many preschoolers. At a time when children should be encouraged in their fantasy play they are being urged to sit still, listen and learn as if they had already entered elementary school. Sadly, if we deprive this generation of children the opportunity for imaginative play we will also be depriving our culture of the kind of creative thinking the world needs.

Brain Development:

Say: Recent scientific research into brain development confirms the importance of everything that we have been talking about. One of the most important discoveries is that the first three years of life are the most critical in terms of brain development. I want to share with you material that says this more clearly than anything I can say.

Share resource papers **Brain Facts** and **Brain Synapses**.

*(I also show a DVD segment on brain development from **Mis Padres, Mis Maestros/ My Parents, My Teachers**, a video available from El Valor, based in Chicago, IL.*

*<http://www.elvalor.com/programs/mispadres.html> (See **Presenter Resources**)*

A web site search will provide other video/DVD resources on brain development.

Health benefits

There is a direct correlation between a child's connection to the natural world and play – the best kind of play that is unstructured and outdoors. And the medical community is providing growing evidence of the health benefits. Many pediatricians are now recommending at least one hour a day spent outdoors and the American Academy of pediatrics has produced an excellent report on the benefits of play.

Review and discuss resource paper **Benefits of Play** (See **Participant Resources**.)

Sharing ideas

Whenever a group of parents and educators gets together there are always great ideas to share, and life experiences that we can all learn from. So we are going to take time for you to tell us what you do with your children, or experiences that have been important to you.

Hear from participants, then summarize.

Summary and Close

It is very important to allow children opportunities to be outside, experiencing the joys of Nature. And the simpler the better. Running in the wind. Walking in the rain and splashing in puddles. Rolling in the grass, then looking up at the sky. Telling stories, or reading together, and sharing lots of love. Love most of all. And fun!

But there is one more thing I want to say.

During this workshop we have concentrated on the young child. On how the brain develops and how early experiences in Nature, with caring and loving adults, are essential for the child's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development.

But my motivation for developing this workshop goes much deeper. We, and our children, are the recipients of an incredible inheritance - this beautiful Earth and all the life it contains. But we only have to pick up the newspaper to know that this inheritance is threatened, and we have to ask: "Who are those who will step forward to respond positively and creatively to those threats?"

Louise Chawla, who has written extensively on environmental and children's issues, has said that in the past it has always been those who developed a strong and abiding love for Nature during their childhood years who have grown up to be those who love and work for the future of Mother Earth.

Which lands everything back in our hands! If we can reawaken in ourselves that sense of joy and awe and wonder in Nature we shared in our stories at the beginning of this workshop, and a love and desire to cherish and protect the Earth, then we can pass that on to our children.

And what a wonderful inheritance that would be to pass on to future generations!

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*** Additional Activities**

For large groups you will probably need to provide additional activities. I have provided books for participants to browse through, and scented herbs for them to experience and take home with them. (These have always evoked more childhood memories.)

I provide Nature treasures (shells, pine cones, unusual seeds, rocks, sheep's wool, etc.,) together with magnifying glasses and water play materials. We have been on Nature walks and I have taken groups outside on moonlit or starry nights.

I have also built on the "Bubble Fest," as bubbles are so popular. Have enough bubble-blowing materials for everyone. Encourage participants to have fun with each other and their bubbles, but also to see what they can discover. Can they see reflections or rainbows in the bubbles? What if they are outside? What happens if the wind blows? Imagine they are with their children. What can they do? How are they building pre-kindergarten skills? If appropriate, give bubble kits to take home for their children.

*Created by Diane Gordon for **Children, Nature and You** (www.childrennatureandyou.org) and **Hooked on Nature** (www.hookedonnature.org). Diane, a former preschool/kindergarten teacher, is the director of **Children, Nature and You**.*