At Home in the Natural World

by Jim Roberts

Jim Roberts captures the challenges of walking with small groups of children under six, building confidence in bushwhacking trails, and walking on brambles. Mr. Roberts gives many clues as to indirect teaching moments while enjoying the ramble with an emphasis on opening the sensory pathways without the clutter of names, which can often give young children a false sense of intimacy with the natural world.

If the children are to be at home in the natural world, then they must be able to move about in it with ease and confidence.

Recently I took a group of children on a walk in a wooded overgrown margin behind their school. They had been seeing this area out the window ever since they had come to school, but they had never been back there. Several times as we began the walk, I heard one child reassuring another, "I'm not scared, are you?" Like many city children, they had never entered even the patches of the natural world near their homes and school. Showing the children that they could move through an area like this—and that it was fun—was more important than the few names and facts I gave them along the way. The most important thing I have to tell children in the woods is not some fact of biology, but the rule, "Step on the briars and brambles, then they won't tangle your legs as you walk." This rule is useful in itself and gives the children a point of interest to focus on as they learn to watch their steps and move carefully. I've had children tell me, after a few months in my class, "I can walk in the woods now because I know how to step on the stickers."

Giving the children an opportunity to learn to move with confidence over rough terrain is one of the most important things we have to offer during the primary years. Like the ability to swim, the knowledge that they can get through thickets and over streams gives the children a confidence that goes far beyond direct application of skill. But unlike swimming, acquisition of this skill does not depend on having special facilities or special training for the teacher. You just have to go outdoors and give the children a chance. Near almost every school, there are vacant lots and wild margins where the children can learn the basic skills of moving through the wild. These areas may not be the most beautiful to our eyes—frequently they are littered and contain a not very interesting variety of plant life—but such an area can still be an excellent learning experience for the children. As for your own skill, you can learn along with the children. You can be more helpful to them, of course, if you practice some on your own first. And naturally, you will want to familiarize yourself with an area before you take the children into it.

Just as the children use real knives to prepare vegetables in the classroom, they must be allowed to take reasonable risks outdoors. It is not reasonable to allow a child to risk serious injury, but skinned knees, wet feet, and dirty clothes are a small price to pay for learning that you can take care of yourself in a rough environment. Such minor problems often serve as controls of error and may even be learning experiences in themselves.

If you start when the children are young enough, you can depend on them to develop good (and conservative) judgment of their own abilities. I've very rarely told any child that he could not try something he thought he was ready for, yet I've never had a child hurt in the woods. Many times I've had to bite my tongue to keep from telling little Paige that the place where she wanted to jump from a high bank across a stream was too hard for her, and the child has shown me that she knew more about her

abilities than I did. Often you can "help the child to do it by himself" and thus let the child develop the ability and confidence to really do it by himself next time. Give Jamie one hand—for balance, not for support—as he crosses the stream on rocks or a log. Hold Emily's hand as you jump the stream together. Stand at the bottom of a steep bank as Matthew climbs down, so that you can catch him if he starts to fall, *but keep your hands off him.*

Soon the older children will want to find their own way through the woods. Let them lead the way while you stay back with the less able children. (You can see better from back there, anyway.) Our only rule on that count was that the children had to stay in my sight. If they didn't, a terrible punishment befell them: they had to drop back and follow me for a while.

At our school, there was a deep gully beside the best trail in the woods. Actually, the trail was about three feet from the drop-off, and I always stood close by so that even if a child had gone berserk I could have intervened, but I warned the children of the danger and they felt that it was their responsibility to walk by without falling in. More than one child has told me proudly, "I can walk by the big hole. I won't fall in." Experiencing this danger taught the children that they could be responsible for themselves in a way which they had rarely experienced. By the time the children were seven, I was taking them to places where even adults must be very careful. But I knew they could handle it, and more importantly, they knew it, too.

The more excellently designed playground pales beside the physical challenges and opportunities of a good patch of woods. Once your children begin to have confidence in their abilities to move through the woods, they will want to go back again and again. Soon they will be entrapped by the fascination of the natural world. It will be their home.

The Difference Between an Apple and a Pear

In order to be at home in the natural world, the children must be able to see what is there. This may seem obvious and simple, but my experience suggests that observation is a learned skill, a skill which certain activities can help the children to develop.

In the school lawn one spring morning, I noticed that the cinquefoils were blooming everywhere, so I thought I would teach the children the name of this very common wildflower. I picked one, showed it to the children, and named it. I asked, "Who can find a cinquefoil?" To my surprise, many of the younger children had a hard time finding one. How could that be, I wondered. I could pick twenty of the dazzling yellow blossoms without moving a step. Is the world of a three-year-old such a blur that he cannot separate out such a distinct sensation as this star shining in the grass?

I was reminded of an experience of my own before I became a teacher. I was traveling deck passage on a ship into Indonesia. The customs officials detained the ship for a day while they searched for things being smuggled into the country. When they finally finished and left, one of the other passengers said to me, "Well, they missed the attaché cases." What attaché cases, I wanted to know. He showed one to me, and then I saw for myself that scattered among the backpacks and bundles were several dozen shiny new black attaché cases, hardly the kind of luggage any of the passengers were likely to be carrying. If I, as an adult who had looked at that pile of baggage for hours each day (not to speak of the customs officials who were searching for such things), could miss something so out of place and so obvious, what does this imply about how we use our senses?

I have become convinced that experiences like this, while unusual for adults, are commonplace for young children. Almost every day when the children came in from the playground, at least one had a quartz pebble or persimmon pit he had found and wanted to show to the others. There were hundreds of these things on the playground, and we had shown them until I feared the older children must be sick of them, but each tiny child who brought one in seemed to feel that he had made a great discovery. Could it be that this child, after months on the playground, had focused on a persimmon pit and really seen it for the first time? I came more and more to believe that this was the case. After all, children who have been seeing triangles all their lives suddenly begin to point them out everywhere after some work with the geometric cabinet. Is this just their joy at having a name for a familiar shape, or is it that they are perceiving for the first time a new entity in the "blooming, booming chaos" of their sensations?

What, I wonder, does a person see in the woods if he has never had an occasion to focus on wildflow-

ers or to notice the shape of a leaf or the texture of a bark?

When I first started teaching, most of my comments in the woods were directed toward helping the children learn the names of various things. The children taught me that it was more important to help them learn to focus their attentions. Even when I do a three-period lesson—"Who can find a sweet gum tree?"—it is more an exercise in focusing of attention than an attempt to teach a name. When I walk in the woods with children, I point out distinctive characteristics of certain plants—the smooth silvery bark of the beech, the odor of crushed wild cherry leaves, the square stem of the mints. In the beginning, I did this in hopes that these distinctive characteristics would serve as keys by which the child would remember the particular species. Now I do it to help the children to focus their attention, to say, in effect, "Pay attention to the different kinds of bark. . . . Notice the odors of plants. . . . Look at the shapes of stems."

The true naturalist notices every aspect of every plant. The keys by which we identify a particular species are merely a device for beginning to know a plant. I never discuss all aspects of a plant with a child (or an adult) to whom I am introducing nature, for this intimate knowledge is something a person must reach on his own. However, a child can begin to reach this kind of knowledge at a very early age, as a story told to me by the parents of one of my children illustrates. One summer day, Billy (age 6) came home with a tiny underdeveloped apple he had found. His father insisted teasingly that it was a pear, and would not budge from this opinion. Billy went out again and came back later ready to deal with his father. He brought a small branch from an apple tree and another from a pear tree. He showed his father the difference in the shapes of the two fruits and the difference in the leaves. Then he said, "Now close your eyes . . . feel the leaves . . . this is how an apple leaf feels, and this is how a pear leaf feels . . . now smell . . . this is how an apple tree smells, and this is how a pear tree smells . . . so NOW do you know the difference between an apple and a pear?"

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Jim Roberts received his AMI primary certificate from the Montessori Institute of Atlanta in 1973. Reprinted from The NAMTA Quarterly 2,*2 (1976): 9-17.*