



Photographs: Sharing Nature Worldwide

Bringing Children Back to Nature

by Janet Barlow

MANY OF US HAVE TREASURED memories of exploring the natural world as children and want to share nature's beauty with the children in our lives. But these days, children seem far removed from the outdoors. In *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, author Richard Louv tells of the many barriers we face in bringing children back to the wilds: extended hours of "screen time," lack of physical activity, and a general alienation from nature. While most parents and educators acknowledge this situation, many are confounded as to how to bring children back to nature. They might think, "I'm not a naturalist. I don't even know the difference between a spruce and a pine tree!" They might lament, "Even if I owned a compass, I wouldn't know how to use it." They feel the urge to help children make a connection with the natural world, but feel powerless to facilitate that connection. Perhaps you feel the same? Luckily, you do not have to be an accomplished naturalist or wilderness survival expert in order to be the conduit for children's discovery (or rediscovery) of nature. All you need is sheer will and some activities to awaken kids' senses, minds and hearts.

The following activities by nature educator Joseph Cornell are fun, engaging and easy to do, yet touch children deeply. Parents, teachers, community leaders, and anyone who lives, works or volunteers with children will find that such activities can greatly enhance any outdoor adventure.

Flow learning

Joseph Cornell developed a process called Flow Learning that is meant to string activities together in a cohesive way. It mirrors how people learn, and gently guides participants, step by step, into deeper and more profound experiences of nature. Flow Learning has four stages:

1. **Awaken Enthusiasm:** represents playfulness and alertness, a stage at which the child is fully physically engaged in the activity.
2. **Focus Attention:** cultivates attentiveness to a subject or experience and leads to receptivity.
3. **Direct Experience:** involves absorption in an activity whereby the child gains an inner sense of the subject on an intuitive level.
4. **Share Inspiration:** builds on the uplifted mood produced by previous activities, introduces inspiring role models, creates group bonding and fosters reflection

These four stages work in concert with participants' changing energy levels, beginning with high-energy activities and gradually moving toward calmer and more focused activities. It is in this calm, focused state that children can most readily make those nature connections we seek to facilitate.

Here are some activities from Cornell's books *Sharing Nature with Children* and *Sharing Nature with Children II*,



Students playing Owls and Crows game.

which are adaptable for different ages (find more detailed descriptions in the books). There are two important points to keep in mind as you embark on these activities with children. First, teach less, and share and experience more. Let nature be the teacher as much as possible. Resist the urge to spout facts and tell everything you know about what you see. Focus first on helping children experience nature through their senses and feelings. Second, allow a sense of joy to permeate the experience. Through these activities, both adults and children can experience memorable moments of joyful play, heightened awareness of the life around us, empathy for living things and calm reflection.

In all activities, hand out the props (if any) after you have explained the activity. This will ensure that the props will not distract the children from hearing your instructions. Have the props ready at hand and give them out quickly so the activity flows well.

Owls and Crows

This is an excellent game for reviewing newly learned concepts.

Flow learning stage: Awaken enthusiasm

Group size: 6 or more

Ages: 5–13 years

Props: rope (3 meters long), 2 bandannas of different colors

Time: 20 minutes

Procedure:

1. Divide the group into two equal teams, the Owls and the Crows. Have the teams form lines facing each other, about 1.5 meters (four feet) apart, and place the rope between them. About 5 meters (15 feet) behind each team, place a bandanna, which designates the Home Base.

2. Make a statement aloud (see below for examples). If the statement is true, the Owls chase the Crows, trying to catch them before they reach their Home Base. If the statement is false, the Crows chase the Owls. Anyone caught must join the other team. Before beginning, practice by giving a few easy statements and asking the players to point in the direction they would run.

If the answer is not obvious to the players (or if they forget which way to run), some of the Owls and Crows will run toward each other while others run back to their Home Bases. During the pandemonium, remain silent and neutral. When the action has calmed down, reveal the correct answer.

Statements: Statements should be as precise and accurate as possible for the age and experience of the players. For example, if you say, “The sun rises in the east,” would that be true? For younger children it might be. But older students probably know that it is the Earth’s rotation that makes it appear that the sun is rising. Here are some sample statements:

Sensory: The wind is coming from behind the Crows.

Conceptual: A deciduous tree keeps its leaves all year long.

Observational (after showing them a leaf): The leaf had five points and five veins.

Identification: This seed comes from an oak tree.

Other statements you might want to use are: Warm air rises; ‘Habitat’ means where a plant or animal lives; Birds have teeth; Ducks, turtles and squirrels are warm-blooded. Ask between 5 and 10 questions, depending on the age of the children. End the activity by counting how many Owls and Crows are on each side of the rope, or end when all the players have joined one side.

Unnature Trail

This game challenges children to look closely at their surroundings.

Flow learning stage: Focus attention

Group size: 1 to 30

Ages: 5–13 years

Props: Human-made objects

Time: 15 minutes

Procedure:

1. Look for a trail going through an area with trees of various sizes, leaf litter, rotting logs and other plants. Mark the beginning and end of a 20- to 30-meter (65- to 100-foot) section of the trail (make sure it is wide enough for two people to pass). Ahead of time, secretly place 16 to 20 human-made objects along one side of the trail. Some of these should stand out (e.g., brightly colored balloons or fluorescent pink cockroaches). Others should blend with surroundings (e.g., rubber bands or clothespins). Keep the number of objects you have planted a secret.
2. Have the children walk the trail one at a time, trying to spot as many objects as they can. They are to remain quiet and not pick up the objects or point them out to others. Have them whisper in your ear how many objects



they saw. Tell each child the total number of objects, and have each walk the trail again, trying to find more. Total “looking” time can range from 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the age and attention span.

3. After two rounds, go to one end of the trail and have the students tell you where the objects are, picking them all up as you go. Discuss how camouflage and coloration helps animals hide in the woods. Then go on a search for small camouflaged animals (insects, spiders, etc.).

Sound Map

In this activity, children listen to and record the sounds of nature around them.

Flow learning stage: Focus attention

Group size: 1 or more

Ages: 5 years and up

Props: index card and pencil for each person

Time: 15 minutes

Procedure:

1. Select a site where your group is likely to hear a variety of nature sounds, such as a meadow, forest or marsh. Have each child find a special listening spot and settle down with a pencil and index card.
2. Have the children mark an X in the center of their cards. Explain that this marks the spot where they are sitting. When they hear a sound, they should make a mark on the card to symbolize the sound (e.g., wavy lines for wind, a musical note for a bird). The placement of the mark should indicate roughly the direction and distance of the sound.
3. Have everyone listen for 5 to 10 minutes. Afterwards, have everyone gather to share their sound maps.



Meet a Tree

Students try to recognize a tree through senses other than sight.

Flow learning stage: Direct experience

Group size: 2 or more

Ages: 4 years and up

Props: blindfolds for each pair

Procedure:

1. Have the children pair off. One partner is blindfolded and then led by the other through the forest to a nearby tree. Tell the children to stay within sight of you and not to go further than 10 giant steps away (for younger children) or 20 giant steps away (for older children).
2. The “blind” partners then explore the tree to feel its uniqueness. Guide them in this by telling them to touch the tree and rub their cheeks against its bark. Ask, Is this tree alive? Can you put your arms around it? Can you feel roots and branches? Is the tree older than you are? Can you find plants growing on it? animal signs? lichen?
3. When the “blind” partners are finished exploring (after about two or three minutes), have the seeing partners lead them back to where they began by an indirect route. Then have the “blind” partners remove their blindfolds and try to find their trees with their eyes open. Suddenly, what was once a forest becomes a collection of very individual trees. Partners change places so that both have a chance to meet a tree.

Safety precautions: Instruct children to be very careful when leading partners who are blindfolded or have their eyes closed. The sighted leaders should take their partner’s hand or arm and gently pull in the direction they want to go. They should walk slowly as they lead their partners around, telling them when to duck under a

branch and when to step over a log or root. Before playing, make sure the children are mature and calm enough to lead each other responsibly.

Recipe for a Forest

This activity encourages appreciation of the diversity of a forest.

Flow learning stage: Share inspiration

Group size: 2 or more

Ages: 7 years and up

Props: pencils and index cards

Procedure:

1. Give each child an imaginary ownership deed to one square mile or kilometre of land. Tell them that on this virgin plot, they are free to create their own dream forest, complete with as many trees, animals, mountains and rivers as they desire. Encourage them to let their imaginations run wild. To encourage creativity, you can give some suggestions: e.g., “To make your forest beautiful and radiant, you might want to add waterfalls and windstorms, or perpetual rainbows...”
2. Have them list the components of their forest and then draw a picture of it. End by discussing with them whether their forests are able to maintain themselves year after year. For instance, see if they have included representatives of different trophic levels in the food cycle — plant-eaters, plants, and decomposers (e.g., ants, mushrooms, bacteria) — as well as subtle factors such as soil and climate.

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The activities “Owls and Crows,” “Unnature Trail,” “Meet a Tree” and “Recipe for a Forest” were drawn from Joseph Cornell’s book *Sharing Nature with Children*. “Sound Map” is from *Sharing Nature with Children II*. For more information, visit <www.sharingnature.com>.

Resources

Cornell, Joseph. *Sharing Nature with Children: The Classic Parents' and Teachers' Nature Awareness Guidebook*, 2nd ed. Dawn Publications, 1998, ISBN 1-883220-72-4, <www.sharingnature.com>.

Cornell, Joseph. *Sharing Nature with Children II*. Dawn Publications, 1989, ISBN 1-883220-87-4, <www.sharingnature.com>.

About Sharing Nature

For over 30 years, Sharing Nature Worldwide, founded by Joseph Cornell, has helped children all over the world feel close to nature. Cornell’s award-winning *Sharing Nature* books have been translated into 20 languages and have made him one of the most highly regarded nature educators in the world today. The condensed activity descriptions in this article can be found fully described — along with many more activities — in *Sharing Nature with Children* and *Sharing Nature with Children II* by Joseph Cornell. For detailed information about Sharing Nature programs in the United States and Canada, contact Greg Traymar, Sharing Nature USA, info@sharingnature.com, 530-478-7650, or Janet Barlow, Sharing Nature Canada, wonder@senseofwonder.ca, 902-494-7644.

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