

Helping Children Form Connections Through Field Trips

by Carol Gratsch Boyce

As the director of an early childhood center I encourage my staff to take field trips. These excursions are wonderful

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ways to extend what is learned in school to the greater world outside our doors. They help children better understand their community by allowing them to experience learning firsthand and can open up new ideas and ways of thinking for children. One benefit of field trips that is often missed is the experience children have in

expanding their connections to their environment and their community.

In his book, *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, Edward M. Hallowell, M.D. describes a five-part process designed to help children develop into confident, secure, and happy adults. This cyclical process begins with feelings of connectedness to people, one's community, and in a larger sense, mankind. Dr. Hallowell believes that helping children form

connections is the single most important thing we can do; it is the precursor to all other steps in the cycle. According to Dr. Hallowell, a feeling of connectedness:

- helps children develop confidence, trust, and a sense of security.
- leads to the development of self-esteem.
- helps children gain the courage they need to try new things and to learn from their experiences.
- is a motivator in the development of moral behavior. It strengthens a child's desire to do what is good for those around him and society as a whole.

There are many ways we can help children form connections with their local community and the world around them; field trips are one way to foster these positive connections. Hallowell suggests 12 domains of connectedness: friends and community, work and responsibility, institutions and organizations, activities and sports, a sense of the past, the arts, nature, pets and animals, ideas and information, love and family togetherness, God and a spiritual life, and connections we make within ourselves. The first seven of these domains lend themselves particularly well to field trips. Let's look

at the types of field trips that can encourage the growth of connections in these areas.

Forming connections through the community

Local communities are the primary source of field trips for most early childhood centers. This is good because one of the most important connections children make is with their neighborhood and local community. Knowing you are a part of a larger community where people are important to each other and interdependent helps children develop a sense of belonging and self-worth. It is beneficial for children to know that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

- Children can take a walk to the local playground or go for a nature — or "I Spy" — walk around the block.
- Children can take a walk through their neighborhood to see what is new, especially if a new building is being built or another change has occurred recently.
- Children can take seasonal walks to see how their local environment changes with the seasons. What

animals and plants can be seen at different times of the year? How does a particular item, say a tree, look in spring, summer, fall, and winter?

- The local library can be visited for a special story hour.
- Children can visit the maternity ward and emergency room of their local hospital. On these trips they can see the new babies and become familiar with the emergency room so they are not fearful if they should need to visit it sometime.
- Children can take their letters to the post office where they can learn how their letters travel within — and outside — their community.
- Is there an article or advertisement about your school in the local newspaper? Visit the newspaper office and find out how they wrote the news and how they share the news with others in town.

Forming connections through work and responsibility

According to Dr. Hallowell, children who are assigned chores develop a work ethic that contributes to their self-esteem. Good feelings arise from children's learning that they are capable of completing a job. This sense of accomplishment helps them feel good about themselves as contributing members of their families and community. Giving children jobs to do in the classroom can help develop this type of connection as well. Field trips can provide children with models of people who are valuable contributors to their society.

- Perhaps you are studying community helpers, baby animals, or how food gets to our table. Many preschools visit fire stations, police stations, farms, or grocery stores.
- You might discuss how people perform jobs in a way that contributes to the greater good for our community and society as a whole.

- Children, too, can be given the responsibility to help their community either as a part of a field trip or back in the classroom. They can work to collect cans for a food drive. This can lead to other areas of the curriculum too, such as sorting and classifying by type of food, size, or color. Cans can be counted and divided into boxes. Nutrition and the food pyramid can become a part of this lesson as well.
- Children delight in being given classroom chores that enable them to feel important to the group. Children can be taught to be responsible for such simple but important things as watering the plants, setting the table for snack, setting out name cards, or helping to fill the water table with the chosen item for the day.
- Homes for the elderly quite often are happy to have children come to visit or make placemats or other decorative centerpieces for the table.

How different our communities would be without firefighters, police officers, farmers, and grocers! Children can learn to appreciate these people for their efforts and recognize them as the valuable members of society that they are. They will take away the message that it is good to help others and that helping can be done in a variety of ways.

Forming connections through institutions and organizations

One of the developmental tasks of childhood is learning how to get along with people in groups. Even young children can learn the lessons of sharing, listening when others speak, being considerate of others, and taking turns. They can learn what it takes to be a friend and why values such as fairness, honesty, and empathy are important. Even young children can appreciate the fundamentals of democracy and how our government works.

- Children can become a part of our democratic process through trips to city

hall where they can meet the town mayor.

- They can visit voting booths on Election Day and then cast their own votes when they return to the classroom. Our five-year-old class does a brief election unit that includes everyone making badges for their favorite animal. A vote for the best animal concludes the unit after much campaigning.

Forming connections through the arts

While children's taste in music, art, and literature might differ from ours as adults, exposure to the arts is a key to developing children's interest and appreciation. As children hear great music and literature and see beautiful works of art they gain familiarity. In other words, they form connections that will continue to bring them joy throughout their lives.

Art museums and galleries are not hard to find if you live in an urban area, although care needs to be taken to present things at a level that the children can enjoy and understand. Art exhibits may be a little harder to find in more rural areas. But beauty — and art in many forms — abounds everywhere. You just have to look for it.

- One of our teachers studies artists and their works with our five-year-old class. Then they visit their local library to view copies of great masterpieces that are on display throughout the building.
- Some pottery shops allow children to create their own pottery or paint ceramics that are provided. The finished masterpieces are then fired and can be taken home.
- Some areas have children's concerts. Many small towns have a local band or perhaps even a high school band that can team up with preschoolers for a special concert.

Forming connections through activities and sports

Children love to be active! Introduce them to sports, activities, and hobbies. These introductions may lead them to interests they can build on throughout their lives. According to Dr. Hallowell, the key to introducing sports is the emphasis on enjoyment. Too many children are turned off by sports that focus on competition and excelling. The best sports experiences are ones where children participate, have fun, and learn the fundamental life skills of cooperation and good sportsmanship.

- We have taken our children bumper bowling at the local bowling alley.
- They have helped plant a perennial garden that beautifies the front yard of our school.
- If your school has no gym, many towns have gyms available for your use with groups of children.
- Trips to unfamiliar playgrounds can be a great treat for children.
- Introducing children to classic outdoor games is another fun activity.

Forming connections through nature

Children today seem to have fewer opportunities to connect with nature. Much of their time is filled with television, computer, and video games. Their outdoor time is quite often spent participating in organized sports. While these can be wonderful activities, they do not allow children the leisure time we once had to simply explore.

Yet opportunities abound for field trips where children can gain a feeling that they are a part of the earth and they share a responsibility for maintaining it. While science museums and planetariums can teach us about the earth and other plants, it is often best to allow children to enjoy the freedom to be

outdoors and explore nature in their own way.

- Botanical gardens can be great places to experience the beauty in trees and flowers and to enjoy the peace and nourishment for our souls that such places can provide.
- Children enjoy trips to a tree nursery or nature preserve. Many nature and forest preserves have park rangers who conduct special programs on wildlife and other topics. One of our classes did an owl walk through a preserve and learned a great deal about owls firsthand. The children in our program have also seen trees tapped and learned how maple syrup is made.
- Many schools find trips to the apple orchard or pumpkin patch to be great ways to spend a fall day.
- A nearby farm can provide hayrides and gardening experiences and the chance to milk a cow or hold a baby chick.
- Some universities have dairy barns that can be toured for a real taste of farm life. In connecting children with nature we have only done half of our jobs. Children must be taught also to respect nature, and to care for and protect it.
- Our school does a unit on recycling. We learn through stories and projects how people can reuse items and thus be more reliable stewards of our earth. These experiences with nature can develop into a life-long love of the earth and nurture the joy that comes from being a part of nature. They can contribute to a feeling of self-worth that is derived from participating in the preservation of nature and our environment.

Forming connections through a sense of the past

Helping children form connections with the past can give them a sense of

belonging and a broader perspective on how we live our lives today. By promoting connections with the past:

- We introduce children to people who lived lives of positive influence and set examples for children to emulate.
- We provide a sense of meaning and purpose to life.
- Children can gain an appreciation for the life they live today as well as for those that came before us and made our lives possible.
- Children can learn from both the accomplishments and the mistakes that others made in the past.
- Many areas have places where children can gain a sense of connection to the past:
 - In two of the towns where I've lived there are restored villages nearby with people employed to work in the homes and to demonstrate how people lived long ago.
 - Children can see how butter was churned, wool carded for clothing, or soap was made.
 - Some public foundations and park districts conduct visits to old one-room schoolhouses where children can experience firsthand what it was like to attend school more than 100 years ago. Visits to these places can be quite an eye-opener!
 - Quite near our school are two restored homes from long ago where children can learn about the people who settled our community and how they lived.
 - Trips to historical museums can also be informative if they are appropriate for the age of the children in your care. One place we always liked to visit had a whole section of old toys that children could actually play with, a clothesline where they could pretend to wash and hang out their clothes, a blacksmith shop complete with bellows the children could work for themselves, and a pump which the children never tired of pumping to see the water splash out.

- In addition to visiting historical places, children can form meaningful connections about our collective past through intergenerational experiences. Cooperation between senior citizens and child care centers can be rewarding for everyone involved. At our school one of our classes sings each year at the senior citizen's Christmas party. And much to the delight of the children, grandparents regularly make visits to help out in the classroom.

All of these activities help children experience life from another person's point of view and help them to understand that life can be lived in many different ways.

Conclusion

One of the most important things we can do for children is help them form connections that promote the development of confidence and self-esteem, encourage the risk-taking that is needed to try new things, and contribute to a sense of well-being and belonging. Field trips are a wonderful way to foster these connections. When we make new encounters possible outside of the classroom, allow children to gain familiarity with new people and places, and help them see how these experiences are interconnected with their own lives, we help to put them on a path to a life that can be rich, rewarding, and gratifying. When we help children make connections with their community, their environment, and those around them, we help them develop full and satisfying lives as they mature through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood.

References

Hallowell, E. M. (2002). *The childhood roots of adult happiness*. New York: Ballantine.

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