

Craig Taylor

What Not To Teach

Spring. The ideal time to get outdoors? Beginning of the seasonal year? My mind returns to a crisp, December Heads UP day. Brilliant, crystal surfaces covered leaf, branch and forest floor alike. That was a time to be outdoors: the shortest day of the year, sharp breath catching in the nostrils and as beautiful and exhilarating as a day could be.

In the centre of this land of frosted ice burned our fire. Sticks crackled in the cold. Logs fizzed. Glowing coals made way for the popping, baking apples pushed precariously close on the ends of sharpened sticks by giggling children. "Look out. Yours is burning!"

"I like it like that. All the skin bubbles and you can pull it off."

"Mmm it smells good. This is so cool. I've never had apples like this before."

Simple. Basic. Magical. A perfect childhood experience: Wonderful images of powerful, immediate contrasts - the hearth giving warmth and life in the midst of a challenging, bitter, natural world - fire and ice. And of course, the apples roasting over the coals and so unexpectedly sweet, warming and bountiful were a deep reassurance of our own part in these natural cycles.

These are lessons best learnt not taught. In our day and age children are primed to respond, seeking matching answers to ordered questions. We adults, when judging those answers often mistake information for knowledge. In fact what really matters is the knowledge won through experience, tempered by life's variables, humbled by a respect for the wisdom of those who have come before.

Life is neither a panel game nor a battleground computer world where what we know is accumulated as a number of hits against the opponent. It cheapens outdoor education to encourage a glib, superficial assessment of the natural world in our children.

Being able to fully appreciate the fire in the snow, the apple in the middle of winter may not come until much later. Children perceive those experiences with a kind of semi-conscious artistic feeling, somehow incorporating a multitude of nuances, often brushed aside matter-of-factly as, "Yeah, it was cool!"

We can destroy their naive grasp of these wonders by explaining, questioning, looking for measurable responses. But we enhance the experience by drawing out the detail, helping to paint the picture more

vividly – the lines of crystal following the veins of the decaying leaf nestled amongst the crisp browns and blacks of the forest floor litter. We invite children's imaginations to fill their perceptions. We help them to connect.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter. They all have their wonders. They are all hugely rewarding times of the year to be out and exploring. "There's no such thing as bad weather," they say, "Only bad clothing!" For those children who have been lucky enough to experience the harsh beauties of winter, spring will hold so much more. Likewise, summer will reveal deeper pleasures to those who have heard the quintessential beauty of a spring dawn chorus of forest birdsong.

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