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Introduction

The original ancestors of the South Pacific looked after the environment quite well. With small populations it was easy. It was not until western civilisation and industrialisation appeared that changes began to occur. Increased populations and industrialisation have put a strain on the environment.

The South Pacific is often referred to as paradise - but is it? Cars emit exhaust fumes containing lead; smoky fires burn; rubbish lies everywhere; rubbish dumps appear near rivers; and oil spills into harbours; fish are dying. Environmental education in the South Pacific is a necessity. So where do we begin?

In this paper, the reason for starting in early childhood will be discussed and topics suitable for promoting environmental awareness in young children will be explored. Methods of teaching that are appropriate for this age will be discussed. Parental involvement is emphasised.

Why begin in early childhood?

Early childhood education lays the foundations for future learning. If it is sound then other learning is more effective. Young children are very curious and take in a great deal about the people and objects within their environment. They ask questions and want to know about things and we as adults must answer these questions to keep them curious and stimulated. Thus, this is the perfect time to begin sowing the seeds of awareness about caring for the environment.

Another reason for starting with young children is that their families are involved with their learning. Parents are the child's first teachers and are heavily involved in the learning process until primary school. Parents are most keen to know what their youngsters are

doing in preschool. Hence, ideally, communication exists between the early childhood teacher and the family. By teaching young children about the environment, parents gain environmental awareness through becoming involved with home projects. This is a chance for parent education.

What should be taught?

Three areas of the environment which children can identify with are clean air, clean water and clean soil.

They can learn about **keeping the air clean** by discussing what clean air **smells** and **looks like** eg it is clear and has no smell. Various aerosols such as fly spray, air freshener, could be sprayed lightly to allow the children to use their sense of smell. Other odours could be investigated eg fruit, kerosene, curry, a freshly cut boiled egg, vanilla, flowers, nail-polish remover, rubbish, disinfectant. The safe smells could be identified. Children could discuss their favourite smells eg a warm cake, popcorn, the sea, frangipani.

Children could examine visual dirty air eg smoke from burning rubbish such as leaves and grass clippings or exhaust emissions from cars on a busy road. The fact that smoke and exhaust fumes are "bad" smells could also be stressed. The fact that exhaust fumes contain lead which is bad for our nervous system and is dangerous should be discussed.

Children could be asked to talk about bad smells and dirty air at home. They could tell their families about smells they like at home and identify smells they do not like. By sending a note home and asking for parents to write down or draw pictures of the bad and good smells from home, the parents would become involved. Children could bring to preschool favourite smells from home.

Clean water is another important topic that can be taught. The teacher could have samples of water from the creek, the tap, the sea, a puddle, and bottled water. The colour differences could be noted. Again the smell could be noted. By pouring fat, kerosene, petrol, etc on water children could note how the water changed. Mosquito larvae (wigglers) could be collected and put in small lids and the affect of pouring fats, oils petrol, etc on the wigglers could be noted. This could be a lead to starting a fish pond to demonstrate care of water for the fish and animal life. Children would have to make sure the water in the pond remained clean. Plants such as water lilies could be added.

By starting a small fish pond, children could learn about the care of fish and the importance of clean water for animal life. Excursions could be arranged to the sea, a stream, or a river, and the bush.

The **soil** is another area that needs attention. We need to take care of it as it provides us with food and it provides habitats for animals. By starting a garden we can show how to care for the soil and how to protect the animal and plant life.

Young children need to dig the soil so as they can examine the life in the soil and plant a garden so as they learn how to take care of plants. They will need two sections of garden; one for **growing** and one for **digging** and exploring. The digging and exploring should be done carefully by the children as they learn to look for animals to study, such as the earthworm. Other animals such as the slaters and animals in leaf litter can be examined and their function of breaking down plant material can be discussed. This can be related to composting, ie. placing organic materials into bottomless large bins so the earthworms and plant feeders can break down the material, which can then be returned safely to the soil.

By planting crops, young children will learn how to take care of plants during the growing process. Perhaps the preschool could sell some of the garden

produce as a fund raiser. The children could observe what happens when fats or toxins are poured into a small section of soil where a plant is growing. The teacher could discuss different poisons such as chemicals in batteries, caustic soda, and other household chemicals. The poison sign should be shown and discussed. Detergents and biodegradability could be discussed when shopping. Questions could be asked about why we should avoid burying batteries or non disintegrating materials because of their effects on the soil.

The increasing amount of **rubbish** is a problem in every country in the world and reduction of rubbish should be another priority. The teacher could discuss reducing the quantity of rubbish at home and at preschool. How can we reduce rubbish? The answer comes from buying fewer products which are packaged composting organic material; recycling glass, cans and paper; and reducing the use of plastic bags, especially for shopping. By having a garden in our back yard, we buy less packaging and eat more wisely. Calico bags could be used instead of plastic shopping bags and sold as fund raisers.

How to teach

The most effective way to teach young children about environmental education is for them to become **involved in activities**, some of these have already been mentioned: setting up a compost heap, a school garden and a fish pond.

Children could also be encouraged to observe what is happening in their neighbourhood. The teacher could design an activity called "environmental neighbourhood watch". Children could report each day at news or **discussion** time what they saw in their neighbourhood that was not good practice. They could make drawings to show their peers.

Role plays of children telling grownups what they saw and what they could do as an alternative to incorrect environmental practice could be used. Teachers could **read stories** about

relevant material such as worms or gardening to assist in developing awareness. **Drawing** and artwork could be used, or **story telling** by children.

How can Parents Become Involved?

The teacher could send a newsletter home to the parents to inform them about the type of activities that the children will be doing. The parents could be asked to assist by doing similar activities at home with children or joining in at preschool to help. At home parents could cut down on rubbish by reducing packaging for lunches and snacks, composting, digging a garden. At preschool parents could help with the digging of the vegetable/herb garden and preparing the fish pond. The reason behind the activities would have to be explained. Parents could also be

involved in sewing calico shopping bags for fund raising or buying vegetables from the garden.

Conclusion

If young children learn to take care of the environment by learning to care for the soil, air, and water, by the time they grow up they will be environmentally sensitive. Parents of young children will also learn to care for the environment and will no doubt be instructed by their young children. Activities such as composting, gardening, and reducing rubbish are not only important but are enjoyable and will enable young children to develop independence and critical thought. This should assist the South Pacific to continue to be thought of as paradise.