

Let's expose children to the environment – not dump it on them

Government decisions to teach about climate change in our elementary and secondary classrooms create the false illusion that we are doing something significant about an unprecedented global concern. This fallacy occurs when we announce that the topic will be covered, but fail to place it within the sequenced curricular context of a well-designed environmental science course. It is even more so the case when we commit to such teaching without demonstrating that we are actually doing something about this huge issue.

Actions speak louder than words. Teaching about climate change without acting on it carries with it the unspoken but very real message, “We adults have screwed up, and it’s now up to you kids to solve the problem.” Surely this is “downloading” of the worst kind. If the current generation of adults abdicates responsibility towards concrete and significant measures in the here and now and across a broad range of societal fronts, we demonstrate hypocrisy. We express grave concern, but we fail to actually do something about it. How then can we expect our young people to become an active part of the solution?

Early last April, I received an email from a mother in Deep River, Ontario, inquiring about the appropriateness of a local school’s possible showing of *An Inconvenient Truth* for Grades 4 to 6 students during Earth Week. She added that “A local principal thinks so, but I’m not so sure.” While I believe that Al Gore, warts and all, has done more than anyone else I know to provide a “tipping point” for genuine corrective action concerning one of the most pressing global issues of our times, my response was an emphatic “No.” My reasons are as follows.

First, such a film is entirely inappropriate for this age of student. It creates an unnecessary fear in children who, at this point in their lives, can do little about such concerns except feel overwhelmed, helpless and fearful. This “ecophobia,” as noted American author David Sobel calls it, is the sort of negative and counterproductive experience that educators must avoid exposing young minds to.

Second, Earth Day and Earth Week should instead be a celebration of the amazing and bountiful life and life support systems of this planet, and the best way to do this is to take our children outdoors to directly experience our natural surroundings. This is square one. This is the fundamental first step in developing and nurturing ecological consciousness and a lasting environmental ethic that informs one’s daily actions.

It begins with a variety of safe, teacher-led and carefully planned experiences in local parks where there is some remnant of a wild and untended part of nature, where children can find bugs and other small creatures on a forest floor, in a field, pond or creek. Adults can share their delight in such direct and hands-on discoveries. Teachers can use the engagement and connection brought about by such experiences as a springboard to learning about how ecosystems work, about how their living and nonliving parts are

intricately interrelated, and how we as humans can profoundly impact upon these relationships.

There is a repeating cycle here, constantly fuelled by the rich and deep soil of direct experience: take them outdoors and provide them with an ongoing variety of opportunities to connect. Spark their wonder, stir their curiosity, encourage the questions that inevitably follow, and then take full advantage of the powerful content learning and commitment to action that can ensue. And, let's realize that such encounters should not be relegated to just one day or even one week. If we truly wish to bring about significant and long-term changes, such experiences will begin now, in September, and they will continue throughout the school year.

Oh, and about that climate change issue. It's time for the current generation of perpetually consuming and polluting adults to stop being calmed and misled by the posturing and rhetoric of many politicians (as well as others) who think that's all we want. It's time for us to both make and demand fundamental and far reaching changes in the way we live on this planet ... for any number of reasons, and for the sake of our children, if not ourselves.

Grant Linney teaches at the Upper Canada College Norval Outdoor School and is past president of The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario. He is also co-author of a just published research summary, "Reconnecting Our Children Through Outdoor Education."

A slightly shorter version of this Op Ed first appeared in the online version of the Globe and Mail on Wednesday September 5, 2007.