

PROMOTING AWE AND WONDER IN CHILDREN

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The EYLF and the NQS both emphasise the importance of the role educators play in developing children's spirituality, particularly the feelings of awe and wonder that humans experience during what are often referred to as 'nature's magical moments'.

Anyone who spends even a short amount of time with children would agree that they are born with a sense of wonder and an affinity for nature. They are naturally curious and interested, with a great imagination and a special ability to see beauty and good all around them. Watch a baby's face and you will see this, or listen to a child's questions:

- "Who makes the rain?"
- "What does the man in the moon eat?"

However, "if children are to keep this inborn sense of wonder alive, they need the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with them the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in" (Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*). To this, I add that the adult – the educator – needs a sense of awe and wonder. After all, we can't give away what we don't have.

As adults, our lives are busy with schedules, work and responsibilities, and the feelings we had for the natural world can easily be eclipsed by them. We need those feelings of awe and wonder back in our day if we are to purposefully share them with children. By sharing, I mean model, identify, respond to, preserve, nourish, enrich and sustain moments of magic.

So how can we resurrect our own sense of wonder?

1. Revisit your own magic moments

Revisit a magic moment from your childhood. Remember it as vividly as you can – what you saw, what you heard, what you felt, smelt or tasted. Recall your emotions and thoughts.

Magical moments that friends have told me about, and given permission for me to share include:

- Pumping for yabbies with his father. He described a sea of soldier crabs marching across the sand. He was that young boy again, and his voice caught as he spoke of his amazement at the sand simply covered with this moving mass.
- Picking vegetables from her grandmother's prolific garden very early in the morning. She recalled the smell of the vegetables and the newness of the little tomatoes she ate as she stood in the garden. She can still feel the cool, wet roots of the lettuce her grandmother handed to her and see the brightly coloured stems of many bushes of rhubarb. She has never liked eating rhubarb but said her heart jumps whenever she sees rhubarb in the shops.

- Seeing an osprey's nest, then watching the mother return to peeping babies.

2. Spend time in nature

The magic moment we revisited simply happened upon us, and we can certainly invoke these memories when fostering awe and wonder in children. However, we need something more. We need to spend time in nature so that we have recent magic moments to enrich our responses to children.

- Perhaps you live near a beach or some bushland. Take regular walks there and you will find you will be constantly amazed.
- In my neighbourhood, the parakeets are forever feeding on the blossoms. It's sheer sensory magic – the mass of bright primary colours, the every-which-way movements of the birds among the branches, the surfeit of busy sounds and pervasive perfume of the blossoms.
- Go further afield. Try whale watching: seeing such huge creatures breach so high and with such power and grace is an inspiring sight that would certainly evoke awe and wonder.
- Or – go to see the turtles hatch. No words can describe how I felt when I walked along the beach and happened upon several nests with tiny turtles climbing out and then skittering to the water's edge.

Notice the little things – like dandelions or ladybirds. Look closer and you will see uniqueness.

3. Become a lifelong student of nature

Another suggestion to reawaken your sense of awe and wonder is to become a lifelong student of nature: so easy with today's technology where we can bring into our lives through the internet many sights not otherwise available to us.

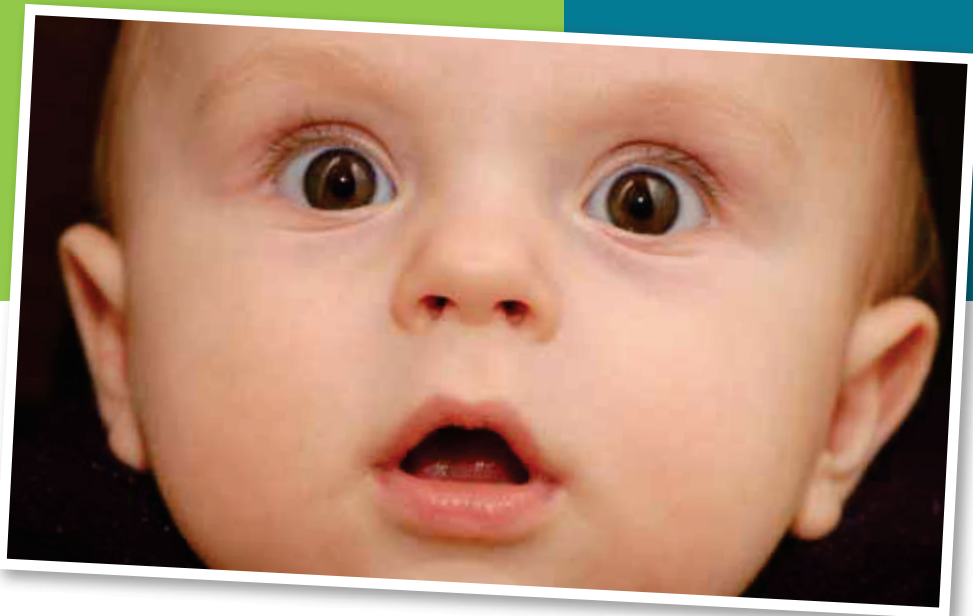
- A photograph of a double rainbow, or a majestic iceberg.
- A video of an amazing waterfall with its sounds and colour.
- Animals which sometimes have attributes that transcend belief and give them persona (eg father penguins, with their young, taking turns to absorb the cold at the perimeter of the group, and mother penguins recognising their babies in the crowd after months away). Now that is awe-inspiring.

4. Idle time and watch the world go by

Another way to reawaken our sense of awe and wonder is to be still every now and then – to "do nothing" – just watch the world go by.

Stress, distractions, and the fast pace of life have cluttered our minds. Time away from all of this helps us allay the chaos of today and allows us to wonder at our world.

- Lie under a tree, and just be – aerobics for the soul.
- Listen to a relaxation tape.



5. Create

Creativity is therapy. Communicating through art is known as 'the language of the soul.' You might like to:

- Paint, write, act, dance, play music ... or learn pottery or some other craft.
- Garden, cook, or beautify your house – everyday creative arts that bring the same result – if your mindset is right.

6. Spend time with children

It may seem strange to suggest to educators who work all day with children that they should spend time with children. However, if we really think about it, the time we spend with children has many parameters – the childcare setting which may or may not have many natural elements, the number of children, our ever-present sense of vigilance that comes with the requirement to supervise and react – are just a few.

Spending time with children in nature away from the centre gives us unfettered and unqualified time.

The best way to explain this is that, as a grandparent, I allow myself to 'just be' when I am with my grandchildren.

One day I was on the beach with them. Initially, they ran around excitedly. Practically everything they found was new and exciting – a fairy petal, a polished stone shaped like a love heart, or a special colour. After a while, the tempo changed: they were drawn into intense looking and I sensed each had times of 'being in the moment' – totally involved.

More than a year later, Julianne, the older child, still had the love heart and the special shell on her dressing table. Her little face became very intent when she said – "Remember, Mami, when I found this" and then moved close and whispered, "it's very, very special, you know."

Putting it together to facilitate awe and wonder in children

1. Responding to children

When we recall our childhood magic moments and purposefully reawaken our own sense of awe and wonder, we know that magic moments can happen at any time. As educators, we anticipate these moments in our work with children. We mentally rehearse our possible response because it has the potential to either deepen the magic for a child with, say, a dragonfly or a frog, or whisk the magic away. We know that children, just as we did and should again:

- Find wonder in anything and everything.
- Share their feelings readily and candidly.
- Can be totally involved in the current moment (not planning ahead or thinking about the past).
- Do not need, and often do not want, lots of information and explanations before accepting anything new.
- Can spontaneously create something extraordinary out of the ordinary (eg a twig can become anything).
- Can imagine they are someone else, somewhere else at any time and in any place.

2. Share your delights in nature with children authentically

While in Montreal, I visited a family daycare service. The educator had been very interested in monarch butterflies for a number of years.

She evoked the children's interest through hatching a monarch butterfly. When the butterfly emerged on a Saturday, she rang each family and invited them to be part of its tag and release. The educator involved the children and their parents in recording: the day and date; temperature; wind conditions; sex of butterfly; and the precise time it was released. The children listened intently to her every word and followed her every movement. One little boy (four years) told me that this butterfly would fly the distance it takes a big jet plane five-and-a-half hours to travel.

3. Encourage children to share

Ask the children to tell you about the awesome things they see, hear, feel, smell and touch away from the service. It could be the sounds of the beach, the taste of watermelon, or the silkiness of a kitten. They may bring in a shell or an interesting leaf. Delight in their contributions.

Conclusion

Simply put, as educators, we need to recapture our innate sense of awe and wonder at what is around us so that we can transfer this gift to children. After all, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but the moments that take our breath away" (Anonymous).