



Science as Child's Play

Children are born with a tremendous curiosity and desire to learn. They are curious about absolutely everything during the earliest years of life and can be likened to true scientists who are virtually unstoppable in their explorations.

Parents and teachers, especially those with young children, can easily foster their innate scientific curiosity during the course of everyday play and interaction. It is fun and enriching to view it as an opportunity to re-ignite your own sense of wonder and discovery while exploring with your child.

The sandbox is a great place to play and learn. It is fun to bury small plastic dinosaurs in the sand and pretend you are paleontologist digging for dinosaur bones! You and your little one can get quite proficient at identifying the various dinosaurs and their unique habits. Even a toddler can benefit from such a game, as they are encouraged to use their sense of touch and not rely totally on vision as they sift through the sand.

Sandbox geology can be introduced to tiny children in the same context. Most rock shops have rock sample sets consisting of 25 or more sets of rocks labeled in little packages. It is fun to bury one set of rocks in the sandbox and, as they are uncovered, match them to the second set. Not only does the child become familiar with the names of various rocks, but also it is a natural experience in visual discrimination and sorting – an important academic skill.

Even when the weather is poor, sandbox discovery games can be moved indoors by placing the sand in a large dishpan. (Supervision is certainly needed to be certain the sand stays in the box.)

I have yet to find a child who does not love this kind of exploration. Often it is experiences that are play-oriented, but content-rich, which plant the seeds for life-long interests. Please be careful not to dominate the experience, however. Allow it to be your child's discovery.

A trip to the arboretum can be made vastly more interesting and enriching by creating a sense of familiarity about what will be seen. You and your child can make their own "field guide." For example, save the flower and seed catalogues that you receive in the mail and cut out pictures of flowers you know your child is likely to see at the arboretum. Have your child pick out their personal favorites of each flower. Limit the number of "favorites" of each flower to one or two so your field guide doesn't get too cluttered!

Next, fold five sheets of 8 1/2" x 14" paper and fold them in half to make a little book. Staple the pages on the centerfold. (This will make a 10 page book.) Paste pansies on one page, roses on the next, hyacinths on the next... and so on. Write the name of the flower on the bottom of the page in large, clear print. Then go to the arboretum or even your local garden center.

It is quite exciting for a little one to find the exact same colors and varieties of flowers as they have in their field guide growing in the gardens! Who knows? In their enthusiasm you may just plant the seeds for a budding interest in horticulture!

You can follow the same format to create a homemade field guide about birds or insects. Use the resources that are around your house to stimulate your child's observational skills and satisfy their curiosity about the world in which they live.