

Projects that make sense

A day in the woods with kindergarteners

by Barbara Roth

The kindergarten teacher Barbara Roth describes a project she carried out with her children. In contrast to what is common today under keywords such as "experiential education", this project exemplifies how to guide children and at the same time lead them towards independent activity. It shows how they learn eagerly and with joy and gain valuable experience.

Because of Corona, this year's project week had to take place in the immediate vicinity, without involving public transport. We chose the theme "in the woods" because there is a lot of woodland in the immediate vicinity. Thus activities in the woods were planned, including a morning with the forest ranger. On this particular morning it is freezing cold. Although it is the beginning of April, there is some snow. The weather forecast for this morning is anything but ideal for an outing. The forecast predicts snow for the whole morning. Should I spend four hours in the woods with 18 five- to six-year-old children under these conditions? I have planned the outing with the forest ranger and so we decide together to go ahead with it despite the arctic temperatures.

The forest ranger – an adult person to be respected

Wrapped up in our warmest winter clothes, the little group sets off. We have a one-hour walk to the agreed meeting point. As we are welcomed, the forest ranger tells the children how we should behave in the woods. He explains: "the forest belongs to the animals and the trees. We are guests in the forest. And that's why we have to behave like guests, meaning: don't shout around, don't dispose of anything or leave it lying around, don't damage anything." He explains it earnestly and addresses the children so that they feel taken seriously. He gives them a guidance, so the children know what it's all about. He says that they would also not like it if a visitor to their home did not follow the family rules. With this clear and straight forward instructions, the forest ranger himself becomes an adult role model for the children. They listen seriously and attentively.



*It is the child's nature to be shown and explained things by more experienced people. Done correctly, this in no way inhibits the child's joy of discovery, but rather encourages it.
(Picture keystone)*

And so the forest ranger guides the children purposefully through the whole morning, instructs them, explains and points out important details. He also lets them do something by themselves, only assisting when necessary.

He tells to the children what his tasks are as a forest ranger. An important part of his work is looking after the trees. He asks the children what we need wood for. The children list what is made of wood at home and in the kindergarten.

Each child plants two trees

The forest ranger informs us that he is responsible for cutting down old and diseased trees and planting new ones. It is important to know that both coniferous and deciduous trees belong to a healthy forest. He takes us to a clearing that he has just worked on. Each child is given a small conifer and a small deciduous tree with a root ball. They have to find a place where they want to plant the two trees and keep a big enough space between them. In doing so, they have to climb over branches lying around. Some children stumble and fall but none starts to cry or complain, they are all busy finding a suitable planting spot. The first thing they have to do is to clear the chosen spot of branches. Then the forest ranger comes and drills a hole in the ground with a special tool. The children plant the tree and cover the root ball with the cold soil.

The forest ranger rounded up all the children. He explains that the little trees will be eaten by deer if they are not protected. He presents some

plastic tubes to put over the trees and a stake to fix it.

Now all the children have to fetch two plastic tubes and two stakes from the forest ranger's car and go to "their little trees". They have to wait until the forest ranger has run the two stakes into the ground for each child. Now they can place the tubes over the plants.

During a later walk in the woods, the children noticed "wrapped-up little trees" in various places, something they had never noticed before.

After the work is done, the forest ranger leads us to a felled snow-covered log. There the children can sit down and eat their snacks. The forest ranger tells the children that he often eats his snack like this with his colleagues, even in winter. Again, no child complains about this particular situation.

Children at the chain saw

After the break, the forest ranger directs us to a woodpile. There he fetches a chainsaw and a helmet with ear protection from the car. He prepares a log so that it cannot roll off. Then he shows the children how to saw a lying log. He asks the children whether anyone would like to saw off a piece of wood. The children are enthusiastic.

Little girls put on the helmet with the visor and ear protection. With their delicate hands, they can handle the impressively heavy, loud chainsaw with the close help of the forest ranger. They each saw off a piece and carry the sawed-off disc home. At the end, the forest ranger gives us a small fir tree with a root ball and says that we can plant it in the garden of the kindergarten. After thanking the forest ranger and saying goodbye to him, we set off on the hour-long walk home. The children start discussing about what they would like to use the wooden disc for. From a cheese platter to a stand for hot pans, new uses keep coming to mind.

Despite ice, snow and adversity: no child complained

At the end of the project week, I ask the children what they liked about the week. Most of the children talk about the morning in the woods with the forest ranger.

I also give the children some feedback and tell them that we had an enjoyable morning and that I liked the way they listened attentively to the forest ranger and worked so hard. I was pleased that all the children were in good spirits despite the cold and snow.

Projects that make sense

In today's education, there is a lot of talk about projects. Often, this is linked to the idea that children should follow their own idea about what they want to do, they should design their own individual plan and organise the necessary material themselves. Or the "kids" are taken into the woods and allowed to spontaneously encounter the environment: the plants, the wood, the animals meaning the so-called "forest experience", the pure, unadulterated "forest experience", an experience that is influenced, controlled, directed, instructed or teacher-centred as little as possible, to purportedly enable the children to make their own immediate experiences using all their senses like "feeling, hearing, smelling, touching, etc". Sometimes so-called "free development stations" are organised where the children can make their individual "experiences": spontaneously, self-motivated ...

It bases on the assumption that children learn best when they pursue an "intrinsic motivation", i.e. when they develop ideas, plans and actions out of themselves. If adults instruct, guide, plan, prepare – so the ideology goes – children would be hindered in their creativity. They could learn little or nothing, their motivation to learn would be hindered or even squashed. But what could these four to six year olds have learned in the woods, what could they have developed by themselves to achieve a learning progress? What could they have "drawn from themselves" that would have filled them with pride and encouraged them? How could they have learned how to plant a tree and that young plants need to be protected? Not to mention that they could never have handled a chainsaw just like that.

How adults can skilfully convey a real woods experience to children in a child-friendly and instructive way was demonstrated by this forest ranger by passing on his own joy and sense of responsibility for his work in the woods and guiding the children with patience and empathy. Due to his genuine friendly contact and his expertise, this day in the woods has become a positively enriching, great experience for every child.

The project described proves that children follow the suggestions and instructions of adults with great eagerness and pleasure. They participate with joy, learn a lot and afterwards, are very proud of their achievements.

This is how projects make sense.