

“Why is the ground dirty?”

Suntrap Tutor, Louise, reflects on some of her most memorable quotes from children



“Why is the ground dirty? Why doesn’t someone clear up all these leaves and mud?”

[After dropping litter in the forest] *“But if I put it in the bin, it will end up in the ocean!”*

“We need to know this because we’ve got to look after the world”

“I used to be afraid of the forest, but now I’m not, because it’s so beautiful”

“Miss, can I sit by the stream because I just feel so calm there?”

“I never liked the woods but now I want to live here! I’m coming back tomorrow!”

“This is the best day EVER!!!” (on more occasions than I can count!)

These are the striking moments when I am reminded why what we do at Suntrap is so important. Our mission is to not only provide memorable learning but transformational personal experiences. By facilitating hands-on activities in nature, children and young people can understand their place in the world, and how to better care for the environment and themselves.

Memorable learning

When more than one child asked me why the ground was dirty and why no-one cleared up the leaves, it provoked discussion about the nutrient cycle, what soil is and where it comes from, and why it is necessary or other living things (including us). However, we were also in the perfect place to learn through full immersion. On a Suntrap visit, children can watch a leaf fall from a tree, explore the leaf litter to see how the leaves break into smaller and smaller pieces and become part of the soil, find invertebrates and fungi that help perform this amazing job, and discover a tiny seedling growing in the crumbly earth. More than this, they feel the difference in leaves as they decay, they smell the earth (known to have great wellbeing benefits) and they marvel at the seedling compared to the full-grown tree. This is when they understand far more than a diagram in a book can ever show them and their learning is deeply embedded through their senses and emotions.

Appreciating the natural world

Richard Louv (Author of Last Child in the Woods), has this take on Baba Dioum's classic saying:

"We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. And touch. And hear."

Through direct experience, children can begin a lifelong love for the natural world and recognise that they are part of it: That nature benefits them, and they have a responsibility to care for it. However, teaching facts and enforcing rules, achieves far less than promoting a change in attitudes and values that motivates positive behaviours. When children are immersed in nature, especially when they are given time to explore and discover for themselves or have an adult role model, we can facilitate the awe, wonder and curiosity that underpin a connection to nature. This is one reason why comments reflecting a profound change in attitude (sometimes after just one visit), are so heartening to hear. To go from fear to love, is quite a transformation!

Understanding our actions

As the child dropping litter demonstrated, there can be some confusion about how to look after the natural world, even if there is a willingness to. During this visit, the child and I were able to see together that there were also many animals in the woodland habitat that could be harmed by dropping litter and I could demonstrate what to do when there are no bins. On a 'Tremendous Trees' activity, one year-six girl thanked us enthusiastically for helping them realise the value of trees and how preserving ancient trees was of more value than planting new ones. The group had worked out for themselves, how much carbon trees of different ages had stored, which probably had far more impact than textbook facts. She was very aware of here generation's role in looking after the planet and some of the things they could do to help.

Wellbeing

Supported visits to natural spaces, can help people discover the personal benefits of spending time in nature for their wellbeing. Often, this can come quite naturally, just by having the opportunity to experience it. I had a boy enlisted in forest school because he had difficulty controlling his emotional responses and often got into fights at school. When he asked to sit by the stream because it calmed him, this was a very moving example of someone who recognised the positive impact nature was having on them and was choosing to access it, all without any specific direction or intervention from adults. Likewise, the girls who were afraid or uninterested before their visit, wanted to come back the next day because of the positive feelings it gave them. (I even remember another child hiding because she didn't want to get on the coach!) Once children and young people realise this free resource that can help them, they will hopefully return to it as part of their wellbeing tool kit. What we then need, is to help them continue to access this resource.

"The best day EVER!"

This feedback means a lot to me, but it is bittersweet as I consider how the experiences we provide may differ from the everyday. My hope through all we do at Suntrap, is to make sure these days are less of the exception but become part of the fabric of their lives, and a lifetime well of experience.