

Children's Religious Ed Notes

An E-letter from the Pacific Yearly Meeting Religious Education for Children Committee

#6: Winter 2008-2009

Learn By Doing!

Active Lesson Plans and Meeting for Business for Children

Sandy Farley says, "Many children learn best by doing." We've certainly noticed over the years that young people learn Quakerism by practicing it—in fellowship, in meeting for business, in service projects, and, yes, in meeting for worship. Not so different from how us "grown up" people learn!

A number of meetings have been working with meeting for business for children. This issue features an article by Robin Durant on her three years of experience with weekly meetings for business for elementary age children at Friends Western School. We also feature Sandy Farley's thoughts on why and how to keep the First Day School active, with useful tips for choosing and building active First Day School lessons.

You're Invited to Join the Conversation!

Join the new Pacific Yearly Meeting listserv for religious educators, including parents and other non-teaching adults. This yahoo group e-mail list is a place where we can share questions, concerns, success stories, events, resources, ideas—"shop talk" of all sorts for those interested in the spiritual nurture of our Quaker children and youth. To sign up, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/quaker-re> or contact Tom Farley, farley@spont.com.

Meeting for Business with Children

by Robin Durant, Orange Grove Monthly Meeting
Founder, teacher and administrator of Friends Western School

When we opened Friends Western School, one of our great goals was to teach the children how to conduct their business in the manner of Friends. We've made some progress, we have a long way to go.

The first thing we did was appoint a nominating committee to choose a clerk—our only office. We had representatives from each age group on the committee, and they were instructed to choose one of the more mature and leader-like of the students to clerk—probably one of the older students. Over the several years we have conducted our business, I have seen many children chosen to be clerk. They always grow into the work.

Each week we hear class updates, committee reports, new business and announcements. We have no standing committees, only ad hoc committees organized for different events or projects. If the students come up with an idea, they form a committee, meet,

plan, and carry out their plans. If they don't, it doesn't happen. This teaches them responsibility, communication skills, leadership, mutual respect, and pulling together. Some of the most fun events have been a boys and girls day—we divided the children up by sex rather than by age. Each group planned the day's activities and lessons. Other fun events included an overnight in the Meetinghouse, local field trips, community lunches, community clean-up, and a field trip to Jet Propulsion Lab. Some of the things that didn't happen were a camping overnight and a field trip to the Long Beach Aquarium.

I'd say the hardest thing about meeting with children is helping them to clerk themselves. At first the adult helps run the meetings, but gradually releases responsibility to the children's clerk. They argue, debate, lobby, all talk at once—just like adults at some meetings. By the end of the year, my only role was to make some announcements at the end or to volunteer to make some arrangement for an event.

They haven't quite succeeded at making it an occasion for worship, but then our meetings for worship are hardly occasions for worship. Boys wiggle, girls giggle. Everybody makes faces to make everyone else laugh. Some days we get close. I have to believe that a time set aside for quiet worship and proximity to adults who are resolutely trying to worship while keeping one eye on the more rowdy of the children will eventually bear fruit for each of them.

The most rewarding thing for me as an adult is to see their satisfaction when they reach a decision together, complete a project together, or listen carefully and with appreciation to one another.

Active First Day School Curriculum

By Sandy Farley, Palo Alto Monthly Meeting

Lead author and illustrator of *Earthcare for Children*.

You've bravely volunteered to lead First Day School. You may have material at hand, or you may have to develop your own. I recommend that you evaluate materials on the basis of whether or not they provide you a variety of activity options so that you can adapt the lesson to your group, be it two children widely separated in age, or 10 children all in first through third grade.

You want the children to have a positive experience. You don't want to be saying "no" or shushing them too often. You want your restless kid to be doing what you want to happen. Your reticent kid needs to become involved. Therefore, you need to have **activities** related to your theme.

Usually kids who are active are happy and involved. If the lesson you are teaching can be imbedded in a game, skit, service project, or craft it will be remembered well. One of the things that has been very successful with the Alternatives to Violence Project in prisons is playing games and doing physical activities to demonstrate the lessons to be learned. Many inmates are ADHD types who are kinesthetic learners. Many children learn best by doing. So think about what the children will DO in your First Day School.

Sometimes your sources may be good children's books or a storyteller. The book you read or story you tell may only be 5 minutes long. What else are you going to do? Sit around and talk? Think about active involvement.

You want to center in on a topic that is raised in the story you are sharing. So you might begin with a song or poem that is related to that theme. Singing or reciting together is a good activity if the material is age appropriate and easy to learn. Beginning with a name game is welcome if new people need to be included.

To help their listening skills, you may want to relocate the group for the story part of the program and do a centering activity before the reading or telling.

After the story, some kids need to move; they only have so much listening concentration, and they may have listened very well. Plan a movement activity—perhaps miming a part of the story, or taking on the role of one or more of the characters. This will help them remember the story. If the story comes without illustrations, challenge them to draw pictures for some of the scenes in the story.

When you are sure that they have understood the story through these recall activities, then you may ask questions that bring the focus to testimonies or practices of Friends that are touched upon. Keep the discussion short. Find a game or two that relate to the testimony or story. For example, if the story is about feeling excluded, play a round of Musical Chairs followed by a more inclusive game and then talk about the feelings people have when they are excluded or included.

How much time do you have? Is there time for a craft? a service project? a related outdoor activity or indoor game? Complete the class time with a review of what you did, and perhaps repeat the song or poem from the beginning. Help them tie together the various parts of the program. Closure is important.

Planning a lesson—an example:

Read about Wangari Maathai. There are two new, excellent books available. *Planting the Trees of Kenya; the Story of Wangari Maathai*, Nivola, Claire A., Farrar, Straus and Giroux 4/1/08.

\$16.95 (for school age)

Wangari's Trees of Peace, a True Story from Africa, Winter, Jeanette, Harcourt 9/1/08. \$17.00 (for younger children or learners of English as a second language)

Possible activities: (Choose what fits your time, space, and group)

- Sing a Swahili hymn from *Worship in Song*. (#'s 164, 229)
- Play a game of Squirrels in the Trees or other game involving trees.
- Plant a tree.
- Meet with an arborist and walk around to find out about local trees.
- Each one picks a tree and names it. (Jenna-fir, Spruce Springsteen, Red Buddy, Raggedy Maple, Percy Simon, etc.) and checks in on that tree from month to month.
- Make bird feeders to hang in trees (seasonal activity)
- Draw pictures or make cut-outs of different trees.
- Take pictures of your trees, (4 times a year?)

- Do a guided meditation on a year in the life of a tree.
- Ask what planting trees has to do with peace, and why Wangari was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- Meet someone from Kenya and learn about that country.
- Play a game that children in Kenya play.
- Sit under a tree and each say something you appreciate about it.
- Make cloth napkins to use instead of paper, to save trees.

The point is that if you want children (or almost anyone else) to remember something, they need to do something. Did you learn the alphabet with a song? Could you learn to knit without needles and yarn?

I used to think that being happy was a bit hedonistic, then I heard what the Dalai Lama had to say about happiness. He pointed out that happy people don't start wars. So I advise you to find the kinds of activities that your children are happy doing and your First Day School will be a pleasant place that children will want to come back to week after week.

Resource Corner:
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting website, www.pym.org

Philly Yearly Meeting (the other PYM!) has a website rich in religious education resources, including pamphlets for teachers, current and past issues of their religious ed newsletter, child safety guidelines, an idea bank (add your own!), as well as resource files on Quaker history, testimonies, faith and practice and more;.

For example, check out their pamphlet “**Teaching the Practice of Worship**” (www.pym.org/education/children/worship-teaching3.pdf), which includes thoughts on the practice of worship in the family as well as in the meeting.

Or notice their thinking on including children in worship sharing: “***Heart-Sharing** is a variation on worship-sharing that invites participants to respond to a query with the immediate impulse of the heart in a single word or sentence. This discipline allows Friends of all ages to participate equally and richly.*”

Explore and enjoy!

Event: There will be a Weekend Retreat for 5th to 9th grade Friends from 4/3 to 4/5, 2009 at the Palo Alto Meetinghouse sponsored by the Middle School Group of Palo Alto First-Day School. The gathering begins with supper Friday, 4/3 and ends mid-day Sunday, 4/5. Activities will include crafts, games, stories, ice skating, worship, and service. Cost is \$50.00 and scholarships are available. For registration and information contact Retreat Coordinator Janet Murphy, 52 Exeter Avenue, San Carlos, CA 94070 650-594-1088 <david.murphy@scbglobal.net> or FDS co-clerk Tom Farley, 650-366-1818 <farley@spont.com>.

Looking for resources? Have a concern you'd like to discuss? Have ideas or experiences you'd like to share? Want to subscribe? Email the newsletter editor, eastwood@sohum.net. The PYM Religious Education for Children Committee will respond to your concerns. Find past editions of this newsletter at www.pacificyearlymeeting.org