



# Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

## Helping Nature Spark Children's Expression

by Heather Fox

*These stories appeared in the Nature Explore newsletter. Nature Explore and its staff are members of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children.*

### Cody Knows Crows

For toddlers, being outdoors is time for adventurous learning, and for developing and practicing new skills. Children mastering the ability to progress from toddling to walking is learning that's easy to see. More subtle is language learning and practice.

Outdoors, children are inspired to ask questions about their many observations. They communicate their excitement in words, art and fantasy play. For Cody, aged 31 months, the Nature Explore Classroom at Dimensions Early Education Programs in Lincoln, Nebraska, provided the setting for a remarkable performance of his developing language and communication skills.

Cody and his friends had learned the song, "One Little Owl," in which various critters are paired with both their sounds and with the hand sign used in communication with the hearing impaired.

One day, as the low-pitched whirr of a helicopter buzzed overhead, Cody excitedly approached his teacher. He raised his hand, making the sign for bird, and exclaimed, "Crow. Caw, caw!"

The teacher asked if he was describing the helicopter. Only when Cody insisted, in words and sign, that he was describing a crow, did his teacher finally hear its call. She marveled at this remarkable moment. Cody had heard this sound behind the louder helicopter, identified it as a crow's call, and expressed this discovery to her so richly.

For just a moment, let's imagine Cody's excitement at hearing the crow. What had been part of a song is now calling to him in real life. We'd all be thrilled to experience such an observation ourselves, and want to communicate it. Cody conveyed his discovery by using the bird's name (crow), its own language (caw), and through sign language—an extraordinary achievement. And to think that this depth of communication came from a beginning language-learner!

This moment was a huge step for Cody in practicing his beginning language skills. The next time "One Little Owl" was sung, during the crow's caw, Cody looked at his teacher and sent her a special smile.



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

[WorldForumFoundation.org/nature](http://WorldForumFoundation.org/nature)

## Johnny's Expression

Johnny had trouble speaking, especially three-syllable words. He was frustrated by the ease with which other children could make their needs known. Inside, he was like them. To others, he wasn't.

Johnny knew that his teachers cared for him, but their kindness couldn't erase his dilemma. His frustration produced frequent outbursts—indoors.

Outdoors, his behavior was very different. Outdoors, the freedom to choose his own activities allowed him respite from his frustrations. He felt happy, exploring as he saw fit, connecting with others on his own terms.

One day, he watched as other children surrounded a small plant, observing something intently. When they left, he moved in. They had been watching a caterpillar inch its way up the plant. Johnny was also fascinated by the caterpillar's slow progress along the stem. Transfixed, he watched for many minutes.

By using a magnifying glass he discovered minute details about the caterpillar. This close observation was his discovery; he owned it. He had something to share that didn't need words.

He sought out a teacher and shared his caterpillar. "In that situation he didn't have to use any words, and that gave him a platform to invite a staff person into his world and share that moment of nature. He was so thrilled," said his teacher.

No words were necessary. But Johnny found one.

"Cat-er-pill-ar," he said. "Cat-er-pill-ar!"



## Haley's Transforming Feather

Haley, aged three, found a pigeon feather on the ground. "I'm giving this to my mommy," she told her teacher, Mrs. Reitz. "It came from a feather tree."

Science learning, crucial for young children, shows them how the world works. Science learning is a core national educational priority. Children excitedly make scientific observations with their peers every day. When these observations are combined with a wise teacher, profound learning results.

Mrs. Reitz wanted to leverage this moment with Haley and her feather into scientific learning. They walked to a nearby tree, where she asked Haley if she saw feathers among the leaves.

"Maybe the feather flew from another tree," replied Haley. Seeing pigeons on a nearby rooftop, Mrs. Reitz asked, "Do you see those birds? Do you know what they have on their bodies?"

Haley knew that birds have feathers. After a few moments of thinking, she realized, on her own, that the feather she found had come from a black and white pigeon.

For a young child, new learning with this level of excitement is something to be shared, especially when the insights come from information already learned.

Following her burst of insight about the feather's origin, Haley ran to the sandbox where her friend was playing. "This feather came from a black and white pigeon," she proudly announced.

Through indoor learning, possibly from a storybook, Haley already knew that birds have feathers. Yet outdoors, where stories come alive, finding a real feather near a tree led to a different conclusion. Haley's teacher could have simply corrected this false belief. Instead, Mrs. Reitz wisely guided Haley in assembling bits of information the child already had, into the new understanding that her feather was from a pigeon.

Haley's vivid and proud "learnable moment" could only have happened outdoors.