

Save The Elephants: Don't Buy Ivory Soap

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What happens when we talk to little kids about big problems?

Interpreters are passionate people. We care about preserving and protecting what we love--and we hope to motivate others to care, too. But sometimes I wonder if we care so much that we do more harm than good. Here's an example of what I mean:

A female interpreter was in the Elephant House at a zoo, talking with a man and his five-year-old son. The boy remarked, "The elephants sure have big tusks." The interpreter replied, "Yes, and did you know that elephants are being killed for their tusks? The males have the biggest tusks, so they're targeted first, then the oldest females are shot, which can really mess things up because the females are in charge, and without them the herds don't know what to do. Killing elephants for their tusks is a huge problem for elephant families." The man and the boy said, "Thanks, we sure learned a lot today." And the interpreter smiled.

I wonder what the interpreter really accomplished by talking about elephant poaching with a five-year-old. Though her language was developmentally appropriate, her message was not. How does a child reconcile feelings of awe and wonder about an animal he or she is looking at while hearing about how its relatives are being shot right and left?

Today, messages about endangered animals are reaching even the youngest kids. TV, children's magazines, computer games, cereal boxes, and even well-meaning zoo educators and teachers sometimes tell tales of environmental woe. This is problematic for two reasons:

1) Young kids don't "get it."

Though it's important for older kids to explore these concepts, many environmental problems are too abstract and complex for kids who are just learning to button their own coats. As an example, the title of this paper, "Save the Elephants: Don't Buy Ivory Soap," came from a campaign slogan written by an eight-year-old girl who had studied elephant poaching in school. She was old enough to hear the message but too young to really make sense of it.

2) It can turn kids off to nature.

Research suggests that when kids are overwhelmed with bad news, they cope by "disassociating" from it or tuning it out. Hearing about poaching, pollution, and habitat loss can be depressing and turn young kids off to nature just when they should be enjoying it most.

David Sobel, in his article "Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education" (*Orion*, Autumn 1995), theorizes that this kind of distancing is exactly what we force kids to do when we overwhelm them with bad news. Who wants to form an emotional attachment to an elephant that might disappear tomorrow? Children *survive* by distancing themselves from what they find overwhelming. Sobel coined a term, "ecophobia," to describe the fear of nature kids can develop when prematurely asked to deal with the environmental problems of an adult world.

As interpreters, we're masters at using *language* and *techniques* that are developmentally appropriate. For example, we know we can captivate a room full of preschoolers by mentioning poop. We know if we're studying owl pellets with third-graders, we'd better let them dissect one. Above all, we know not to ask a mixed-gender group of fifth graders to stand in a circle and hold hands. But along with our interpretive language and techniques, we must put our interpretive messages through the age-appropriate filter.

It's not a cop-out to save big, complex issues like poaching, mass habitat destruction, and global warming for middle schoolers who are better equipped to handle them. Early and middle childhood is the time to lay the foundation for future caring by providing kids lots of positive, meaningful, joyful experiences. Louise Chawla of Kentucky State University found that most environmentalists attributed their commitment to "many hours spent outdoors in a keenly remembered wild or semi-wild place in childhood or adolescence, and an adult who taught a respect for nature." Not a tough prescription to fill.

You may be surprised that educators from Brookfield Zoo suggest backing off from teaching young kids about endangered animals. After all, much of Brookfield Zoo's work is about protecting animals around the world. It is a conservation organization with a mission: "to help people live more sustainably with nature."

However, the zoo has come to interpret this mission much differently for younger kids than for teens and adults. Research shows that many environmentally active adults today have one thing in common: a childhood filled with fun, positive nature experiences. That's why the focus of Brookfield Zoo's new Hamill Family Play Zoo is all about providing these experiences for children from infants to 10-year-olds and their families. There won't be information about endangered animals in sight.

So what if kids ask me about endangered animals?

Even if you don't bring up an animal's population status in the wild, a child may ask you whether or not it's endangered. How you respond depends on the child's development and age. For all ages, find out what the child has heard and let the child tell you the details. Ask about and acknowledge the child's feelings. Here are some other suggestions by age level:

7 and under:

- Answer questions briefly and honestly: "Yes, tigers are endangered, and that's not good. People are working to protect them, but it's a tough situation."
- Lift the burden from the child without disempowering him or her: "I know you are concerned about animals. There are grown-ups working hard on this problem, and maybe when you grow up, you can help out, too."
- Sometimes a young child gets the impression that all animals are endangered. You might say, "Some animals have problems finding homes, but many don't. Robins, squirrels, and raccoons live right around here, and they're doing great!"

7 to 11:

- Acknowledge the child's feelings: "Where did you hear about elephant poaching? How did you feel when you heard about the problem? I know it's a sad story, but people are trying to help."
- Redirect to something more local and concrete: "I know it's hard to think of what to do to help elephants. What can we do to help animals around here? That's important, too--and it's probably going to be easier for us!" Suggestions include picking up litter in natural areas, maintaining bat houses and birdbaths, planting native shrubs and flowers to attract local wildlife, and asking friends to help.

11 to 14 and up:

- Discuss ways to get involved locally like adopting an animal at a nearby zoo or aquarium or volunteering at an animal shelter.
- Initiate or help with recycling programs at school or in the community.
- Communicate concerns about the environment to legislators at the local, state, and national levels.
- Get involved with national and international conservation groups, such as The National Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, Defenders of Wildlife, and the African Wildlife Foundation.
- Be a model: share your thoughts about conservation actions you have taken or would like to take.

Keep in mind that the way you respond to a child's question can be a subtle indicator to parents of how they might handle future conversations with their children about these issues.

If we want young children to grow into environmentally-conscious adults, let's encourage them to play in nature and learn easy tasks like shutting off the water when they brush their teeth. Even Rachel Carson--and I can't think of a more impassioned environmentalist--wrote *Silent Spring* for adults and *The Sense of Wonder* for families with young children.

As David Sobel puts it, "*If we want children to flourish, to really feel empowered, let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.*"