

Our Lived Experience Can Trigger Conservation

(Dr. Srirang Jha, *Society & Environment*, Issue July 2008, P.O. Box 73000, Dubai, UAE)

Arvind Gupta graduated from Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, in 1975. He worked with Tata Motors for a few years before becoming an activist for popularizing science among children at the grassroots level. He has developed many useful low-cost science-teaching aids using locally available materials. He is known for using ordinary things for doing science experimentation and recycling modern junk into toys. Arvind is a prolific author with over ten books to his credit. Besides, he has made around 100 films on science issues for children. He has also worked with UNESCO, UNICEF, Halmstad University, Boston Science Centre, MIT (Media Lab), Walt Disney Imagineering and Research, Auhof Rehabilitation Centre, Hilpolstien, Germany and the International Play Association, Finland. Currently he is heading Children's Science Centre, Inter-University Centre for Astronomy & Astrophysics at Pune in India.



How are the emerging concerns of global warming and climatic change important for young children?

Children will have to face the consequences of global warming. They should become conscious of their ecological footprints. They should be made aware that the present consumerist / materialist life style is not sustainable any longer. Every little act, every little step, every person and action count.

As citizens of planet earth, what happens to earth affects its young citizens too. To that extent global warming and climatic changes are important to children. They did not

create this mess. Earlier generations / development paradigms were responsible for them. But as Earth's Citizens the young children have to imbibe eco-sensibilities, which can be summed up in a single, sentence LIVE SIMPLY THAT OTHERS MAY SIMPLY LIVE.



How can we sensitize the children about environmental crisis?

Our daily lived experience of traffic jams, sky-rocketing prices of fuel; high noise levels, load shedding, water closures, adulterated food etc. can be the starting point to engage the children with discussions. These then should be followed by actions an individual can take to reduce the crisis. The next step would be to involve the immediate group (family, peer, school buddies) and finally the community.

BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO BE, may sound a little cynical in this consumerist era but unless we are honest in what we do ourselves, we will cut little ice with children. Children are too smart and see through blatant adult political lies.

Before sensitizing the children, the adults need to imbibe these sensitivities themselves. They could make a beginning by living it themselves - by consuming less, using public transport, buying locally, car pooling, adapting solar water heaters etc. Doing more with less should be the credo. Watching less TV and taking more nature walks is a good option.

What role can the media, community, school and parents play in cultivating eco-friendly habits among the children?

Media encourages unsustainable, consumerist life styles. One has to just look at the advertisement in magazines and on TV. Students should be made to look at them critically. This could be done through interesting activities in the class. There are some good programmes too.

In the context of the city, the community comprises of the housing colonies, neighborhood etc. Ecologically conscious housing societies, can work out garbage segregation, waste recycling, encouraging solar energy, rain harvesting, minimizing use of private transport by car pools, minimum use of lifts, electricity off for 2 hours a day etc.

Schools can play an important role. Best example, "Say No to Crackers" campaign in Delhi —the capital of India made a big difference as many children abstained from crackers. Schools should go beyond merely making projects, having quizzes, debates. They should evolve environment friendly practices and follow them - less use of paper, plastics, and packaging may be a starting point.



What kind of activities would you suggest to inculcate an attitude among children that is conducive to conservation?

Occasional visits to adjoining slums will help middle class children develop a respect for the resilience of the poor. If they can stay for just one day in a slum, that would be very educative. Where do the poor shit? How difficult is to get a pail of water? These direct first hand experiences of deprivation of the vast majority should be the first lessons for a lasting eco-conscious-ness. Without lectures or sermons, children will imbibe the lessons of frugality, of doing things with less.

The consumerist trash plastic bottles, tetrapacks, ice-cream sticks and so much junk are overflowing from rubbish dumps into streets. Children should be encouraged to make their own toys, learning / teaching aids using trash. It will have a double benefit — it will break the stereotype that science can be only done with burettes, pipettes and fancy glassware and plasticware. Also, the children will become active agents of cleaning up the societal mess and will also be learning to manipulate different materials to make a good working science model.

You have been engaged in innovative toy making from waste and discarded material. How far do you think your efforts have succeeded in creating an ambience for conservation?

There is a very strong element of re-cycling in the toys and science models I make. The Indian tradition implicitly believes in reincarnation. This could be easily extended to the material world - all the cartons, bottles, tubes, batteries, plastic cups we discard every day.

I have a website <http://arvindguptatoys.com> There is a section on toys, which is the most popular section. There are 1400 photographs of Toys from Trash on the website. It opens up amazing possibilities of doing creative activities using junk. My efforts are a small step towards creating more sustainable, low-energy, eco-friendly toys - converting societal waste into children's assets.

Do you think that environmental education should be made compulsory at all levels?

Experience has shown that anything made compulsory in schools and colleges is met with resistance from students. No one likes to study an additional subject. Our children are already overburdened and a new subject is not a good idea. Instead, environmental concerns should be integrated into already existing subjects. For example it would be greatly educative to show a 20-film "Story of Stuff" (Free download from www.storyofstuff.com). It will help children see the consequences of their own live-styles on the environment.

The Internet has been liberating in many ways. You need not be a big media baron or politician to have your voice heard. One of the proposals with the National Council for Educational Research & Training (India) is that children in schools survey their immediate environment — make a list of the plants, animals, birds in their region, make a survey of the polluted water bodies, industries and each schools uploads it on a common website. In due course we will have an authentic biodiversity register — a common pool of information, which everyone can dip in. Students could do all this.

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