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Judith Amfahr
Northwood School

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WHAT EVERY YOUNG IOWA CHILD SHOULD KNOW

Judith Amfah
First Grade Teacher
Northwood School
601 28th Street
Ames, Iowa 50010

Driving across the state of Iowa on Interstate 80, through rolling green hillsides, past fields of growing grain and well-maintained farms, the words of Iowa poet Sarah Hall Maney (1982) often come to mind —

"I am an Iowa Child,
Part and product of the land on which I grew,
Flat and open and straight, like
the farm roads that bordered the corn
Friendly and receptive, like the rich,
black soil that grows the corn
Simple, and plain, but productive,
like the fields of soybeans and hay. . ."

Reflecting on this poem makes it easy to develop some themes that are important to teach children growing up in Iowa today. For where do we have greater opportunities to teach awareness of environment, the beauty of nature, and the good life, than right here in Iowa? And regardless of your district science curriculum, these themes can be tucked between, or incorporated into existing units of study. Often it takes just the right story to stimulate thinking and encourage children to ask questions and seek knowledge.

Share with the children in your class the best authors that are available. Try to select authors that reflect love of the environment and real life experiences in their writings. The fiction books that you use with children should, first of all, be entertaining. Beyond that, look for books that expand vocabulary and provide opportunities for teaching beyond the story itself. We need to expose children to the following themes: gardening, seeds and weeds; weather; changing seasons and time; foods and nutrition; healthy bones and teeth; rocks and soil; and animals. These themes can be developed through the use of motivational stories and specific followup activities.

Gardening

Who can ignore the first green, growing sign of spring in Iowa? The dandelion provides plenty of specimens to study, so why not dig up enough for everyone? Pick a time following a rain, grab your dandelion digger, and head for the nearest field. Incidentally, many school playgrounds have dandelions, so you won't be traveling far. Examine the tap root, and discover why this plant has survived so well. Give a little history lesson here, mentioning that the early colonists depended upon this plant for food and medicine and made use of each part of it: the greens for salad, the blossom for wine, and the roasted taproot for a coffee-like drink. The dandelion came to America on a ship, just like many of our ancestors (Schaeffer, 1972). And don't forget to use the story *Dandelion* by Donald Freeman in conjunction with the activities. The French origin of the word

is also interesting: *dent-de-lion* means lion's tooth.

A discussion of gardening wouldn't be complete without mentioning two classic garden thieves, Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny. Beatrix Potter, a naturalist and environmentalist in Victorian England, wrote in authentic detail about animals. Their habits, foods and behaviors are true to life. Follow-ups to these tales might include a discussion of whether the characters were good or bad, and why. A Peter Rabbit party is always fun, but what kind of food would you serve? Let the class brainstorm ideas. It could be raw vegetables, but you might end up with carrot cake and blackberry tea!

Weather

What changes more often than the weather in Iowa? Use *Mr Grumpy's Motor Car* or *Farmer Palmer's Wagon Ride* to teach the importance of finding a meteorologist you can rely on, and forming the habit of listening to weather reports. Keep a class weather chart and record the predicted and actual weather over a period of time.

Changing Seasons and Time

Young children are often quite confused over the order of the changing seasons. But no one is more confused than Silly Goose! Use the story *Silly Goose and the Holidays* to introduce this unit of study. This is a good time to begin individual diaries which help with the sequence of events. Record only special events with the children, over the entire school year, and this becomes an enjoyable memory book to keep at the end of the year. The use of frame sentences enables the beginning readers to compose their own diaries. Illustrations complete this project.

Three delightful stories that present the order of seasons are — *Frederick; Sometimes It's Turkey, Sometimes It's Feathers* and *The Little Brute Family*. Beyond the seasonal themes, these stories deal with family conflict, individual differences, and feelings about pets.

Hibernation always interests children, and they should be aware that some animals disappear in winter. *What's the Matter with Carruthers?* is an excellent story to read in late fall. In the spring, use the story "Spring" from *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. This story is very effective if you can find an old calendar, and tear away the months as you read the story.

Foods and Nutrition

If you are looking for the perfect story to stimulate a discussion of snacks, try *Yummers*. The lesson is obvious to the audience, even though it escapes the heroine. For a fluency exercise, try listing all the snacks you can think of, without evaluating them. Then, followup by developing a rating system, and rating the snacks. It is interesting to discover how many good and bad snacks the list contains.

Bread and Jam for Frances and *Cheese, Peas, and Chocolate Pudding* are two stories which deal with food dislikes in young children. This is a good opportunity to encourage the class to list some foods they dislike, and to make an effort to try one of them soon. You might like to enlist family support here, and send home a letter in order to help the child accomplish this goal.

Healthy Bones and Teeth

Albert's Toothache and *Doctor DeSoto* are two stories dealing with the subject of teeth. In the primary years, a recognition of missing teeth is most appropriate. A Happy Tooth booklet is a way of recording losses and gains. One page can list primary teeth they have lost, and another page the number of permanent teeth they now have (Fig. 1). The completed booklet, with a Happy Tooth cover, is a take home project that children are proud of.

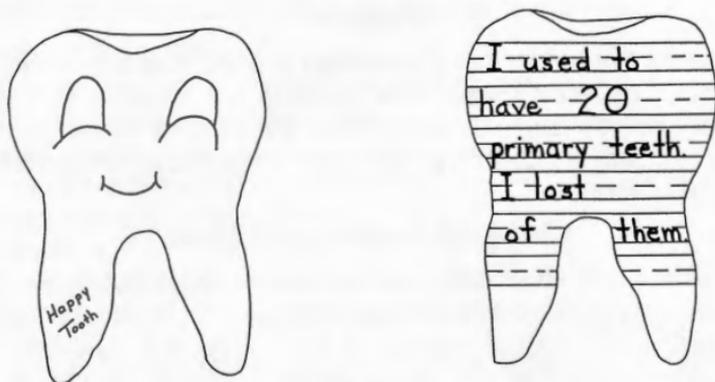


Figure 1

Rocks and Soil

Iowa children should be aware that long ago glaciers passed over our land and had a great effect upon its form. *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* is a special story dealing with a missing child, but when using the story draw attention to the fact that Sylvester has changed himself into what resembles a glacial erratic!

Farmers in Iowa face many problems when growing crops — weed control being one of the most persistent. *The Unicorn and the Plow* is a fable that calls attention to this situation, and uses a miracle to solve the problem. But, in real life, how would the farmer decide what to do?

Animals

The world of animals is a favorite subject with young children. Try using the book *Aminal* because of the fine description it contains. When reading this story, withhold the last page until the children have drawn a picture of what they think the Aminal looks like, and then finish the story together.

Camouflage in nature can be introduced with the story *A Color of his Own*. A simple outline of the chameleon in this story can be provided, and children will enjoy creating their own colorful chameleon, cutting him out, and placing him in an environment where he is camouflaged.

Something to Crow About is a funny story that deals with single parenting and the responsibility of raising children. Beyond that is the whole subject of animals that hatch from eggs. This is a good research project for young children, and books about turtles, snakes, frogs and birds can be provided for their research. Learning what the eggs look like and the differences in size is another project that

children enjoy. This can become an art project, and eggs can be designed and cracked open (cut apart), to reveal what is hatching.

The use of these basic themes can help to provide experiences that develop understandings and appreciation of our state. Hopefully this can pay rich dividends in the future. For the young child growing up in Iowa is fortunate indeed, living in the midst of good food, clean air and a beautiful land.

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