



Education  
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## Teaching Children About Native American Life

For the past six years, it has been my privilege to lead groups of schoolchildren of all ages on hikes through the woods for what I call a Native American experience. Though brief – the hike lasts just two hours – the experience gives the children a chance to feel what living in pre-industrial America might have been like, and what life can be like now, if one wants to take the time to try.

Taking children out into nature, into the “Great Church” (as native people once tried to explain their reverence for Mother Earth to Europeans) is the only way to truly offer an experience of what it means to be Native American, not just in the past, but now. Teaching children about Native Americans in the classroom only makes the topic conceptual, and perpetuates the mistaken view that Native Americans are extinct, something from history to remember, but gone today. It is essential to share with children the traditions, beliefs, and understandings of the native people of America. But this learning cannot be done in an intellectual way only, because that keeps the Native American approach to life as only an idea, words on paper – interesting, but not alive.

The hike always begins with a question that I ask all the children, regardless of their age or background: if this whole country was at one time, not very long ago, full of Native American people living even in the very woods we are hiking, where did they all go? Where are the Native Americans today? Here is a sampling of answers that I have received on a regular basis: *in the woods, in India, in Heaven, under the ground, in tents.*

Just last year, I asked the same question of seventh graders in a prominent public school in Westchester County, well known for its academic standards and commitment to arts-in-education. I explained to them how, according to *The Last Algonquin*, a book by Theodore Kazimiroff, up until 1924, there was at least one Native American man living on the land in the Bronx, in the traditional way of his ancestors. So, I asked the children, where are the native people now? The answers I received included: *in Colorado, in Mexico, in town houses.*

How can one affect the view in children that Native Americans are of a time gone by? I think the answer lies in the telling of traditional tales that still apply today, in sharing real-life stories and personal experiences, and then facilitating the children’s own personal experiences, which many of them will always remember.

My family by marriage is Native American, and so I have had the honor of learning about many tribal traditions and belief systems firsthand. Most children only know what they have read or seen on television, so I try to find a gentle way to present the understanding that Native American people are still alive, still practicing their traditions, and that while some live in towns and cities, others choose to live together on their own land and practice their own ways. I don’t press the issue of the

deplorable state of the reservations because I don’t think children need to be lumbered with these details yet. My main focus is to tell them what the native beliefs are and were, and about how these were often contradictory to European ways. Then, later, they can come to terms with the events of history and the present situation on their own.

One legend that the children and I explore together on our hikes concerns the Cherokee belief in the “little people” of the dogwood trees, of the mountain laurel, and of the rocks. In one version of this story, it is said that the dogwood people are here to teach humans generosity – that before you can receive you first must give. I tell the children how the Northeast woodland tribes spoke of the trees as “standing people,” referring them to the Ents of the *Lord of the Rings*, which they have all seen. Then, we go through a process of saying hello to the forest by putting our hands on trees and letting them know we mean them no harm.

Having led thousands of children from inner city, parochial, public and home schools on these hikes, I know that every child relates to this process. For some seventh-grade boys, the experience turns into tree hugging. Many children explain to me that the idea of a living spirit in a tree matches their belief that “God is in everything.” Fourth graders from urban environments often take up the exercise by greeting the forest with “sup, tree?” and give the trees their special handshakes. No matter what their expression for this new experience, no child ever finds it difficult to think of trees as containing a living spirit, or to imagine that it is a life. When we leave the forest, I often hear the children calling out behind them: “Take care, tree! Don’t get cut down!”

The telling of the legend of “Little Deer,” a classic among native storytellers, is another favorite moment on the hikes. In this story, the animals teach humans not to disrespect them by giving them diseases, which are then healed by trees and plants. After hearing the story, we practice making an offering to the land as a gift of thanks. We face each of the four directions with our offering, usually tobacco, as is traditional, and later hang “tobacco ties” in a dogwood tree. Sometimes, the children make very deep and sincere prayers for a sibling who is ill, or for strength they need, and will place something of personal value in the tree. Last season, a student actually put a dollar bill in the tree, to the utter shock of his peers. He reasoned that this item was something of value to him, and was his way of giving back for what he had received in his life.

With older children, the hike often includes a process of imagining that we have left behind a European life and have been adopted into a Native American tribe, as often occurred in history. They try choosing new names for themselves, and experience a “purification” in the smoke of burning sage. Then, they find a place to sit alone in the woods as a small “rite of passage,” to contem-

plate who they are and what they wish to become. Seventh graders have repeatedly told me that this experience was their favorite part of the two hours, just to sit alone in the woods and think. Is there any reason why this experience couldn’t or shouldn’t be part of the education of a child who, at 12-13 years old, is going through a natural and crucial change? Why not take school classes into the woods more often, so that children can connect with nature and be with themselves, and not just deal with textbook-based curricula?

Whenever I ask children to tell me something new they learned during the hike, they don’t talk about the historical facts that I’ve taught them. Instead, they tell me that they learned “that everything is alive,” or “that you can say thank you by making an offering.” They remember the truths, values, and living qualities that are eternal.

Peoples and cultures may come and go, but the truths that they lived by are what last, and are the legacy that they leave to us as their descendants. The native people of the Americas may have given the immigrants lacrosse and potatoes, and there may be validity in learning that corn, squash, and beans were known as “the three sisters,” because these facts are relevant to life today. However, it is the ethics and standards of a people that make the biggest impression on us, because they are not intellectual but are felt, lived, experienced and practiced now.

Such valuable learning cannot be done through books alone. Only through the living experience can a child be given the opportunity to keep these values alive and real, as it has been my honor to and privilege to do. \*

Barbara Sarbin’s “Earth School” programs were developed from the Native American understanding of the Earth as our school, and nature as our teacher. Her Arts-in-Education classes are supported by the Westchester Arts Council and BOCES.

For more information, visit:  
[somethinggoodintheworld.org](http://somethinggoodintheworld.org) or [earthschool.info](http://earthschool.info).

