ESSAYS

Nature's Answers to Your Kid's Difficult Questions

BY GARETH MCGRATT · FEBRUARY 7, 2020

When and where it will happen is anyone's guess. It could a question lobbed from the backseat on a long car ride or an idle query posed while pushing around a supermarket shopping cart. Sooner or later, kids will inevitably blindside you with one of life's many difficult questions.

When it happens, breathe! Fortunately for us adults, as is the case with many challenging problems of daily life, answers can often be found in nature.

So, here are some kids' questions that nature can help you address.

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Where Do Babies Come From?

You know this one was coming, didn't you? It's a classic, true, but tricky to manage.

I once stood by a vast plexiglass panel separating the public from the captive beasts at the Smithsonian's National Zoo. Members of the public came and went, taking a few pictures before moving on. All the while, the animals seemed to be in a world of their own, all be it one of concrete and artificial forest backdrops.

One key sign that captive animals such as the bears inside this particular enclosure are happy and relaxed is the display of normal social behavior as in the wild, such as mating. And as it turned out, these two particular bears were feeling very, very, happy and relaxed indeed.

A young couple with two kids in tow, one still stroller bound, walked up to the glass. The older of the kids, a young girl, enthusiastically pointed to the fervently fornicating bears and with a beaming smile asked her parents what on earth they were doing to each other. The couple looked at of a loss was about to run over them. With a beaming exhalation of their precarious parental situation, the mother and father kicked the stroller into reverse and physically dragged their children away with a blunt explanation that the bears were "just wrestling."

Photo: Jo Crebbin

What better way for kids to get a basic understanding of the mammalian lifecycle, of which we are all a part and product of, than the harmless display being put on by an animal featured so prominently in children's stories?

If you can't explain to your kids what's happening around them every year come springtime, then how are you ever going to give them the honest understanding of their own reproduction and sexuality that they deserve when the time comes?

Start with the bears. It's easier that way.

Are You Going to Die?

Everything dies. It's a fact of life. You will die and your kids will one day die, too. While that isn't something you necessarily want your kid to be faced with, it is our reality and they deserve a basic understanding of life and death.

Last year, my family found a baby bird that had fallen out of the nest and was lying on its back in a baking hot parking lot. Remarkably, it was still alive, but things didn't look good for the little bird.

Photo: Tomas Kaya

We scooped it up and rushed home to get some water into its severely dehydrated, tiny body. The bird drank a few drops from a syringe and we left it to rest in a dark cushioned shoebox. I told my young daughter that although it was alive I doubted whether it would make it through the night.

"But I don't want him to die," she said.

I explained to her that the chick had been through a lot, and every year thousands of young birds fall from the nest and die. It's just what happens sometimes. She seemed to accept this for the time being while keeping hope alive for our morning rescue.

But come morning, the chick had passed.

We went out into the countryside where she and I dug a small hole. We said our goodbyes to the delicate form and laid it in the dirt.

The next day, we saw that the chick had been dug up and eaten, most likely by a fox. Although that may seem like a tragedy, it is also something beautiful.

It was a perfect moment to show a child that, although a chick was gone, its energy was now flowing through another will heart out there somewhere.

We all will die, but the story doesn't end there.

Where Does Meat Come From?

Most of us grow up with the story of the three little pigs which I guess is meant to teach kids the importance of hard work versus laziness. But it also teach more useful, however, to turn that classic tale upside down. Instead of a narrative driven by three pesky predators, I prefer to see things through the eyes of the wolf.

Once the traditional storyline was well established in our family bedtime repertoire I switched things up. This time, my daughter was captivated by the drama of a the wolf desperate to feed her hungry pups waiting alone in the den. I wasn't give away the ending, but needless to say, it shows a child that there are two sides to every story.

Photo: Ian Beer

Ok, okay, the pigs get eaten!

Its an age where everything about nature is becoming Disneyfied, a sentiment story such as this will be sending death to nurture.

Whether it's the demonization of predators such as wolves or bears for feeding on the flesh of others or understanding our own responsibilities as meat eaters (if we eat meat), children need to have an understanding that where it comes to chewing down on a burger, a life had to end for that meal. And that's okay.

We all need to show more respect to the lives that keep us going and kids can't do that if they never know it existed in the first place.

Does Every Family Have a Mom and Dad?

Families come in all shapes and sizes, which can pique a child's curiosity about how families that don't resemble their own stay work.

Well, we would all do well to remember that Nature has so stated goal nor does she discriminate.

In her groundbreaking book, *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari points out that "Culture tends to argue that it forbids only that which is unnatural. But from a biological perspective, nothing is unnatural."

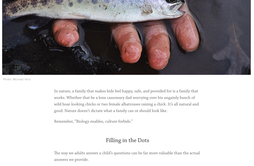


Photo: Alex Lee, NPS

In nature, a family that makes kids feel happy, safe, and provided for is a family that works. Whether that be a lone cassowary dad worrying over his ungainly bunch of wild boar-looking chicks or two female albatrosses raising a chick. It's all natural and good. Nature doesn't dictate what a family can or should look like.

Remember, "Biology enables, culture forbids."

Filling in the Dots

The way we adults answer a child's questions can be far more valuable than the actual answers we provide.

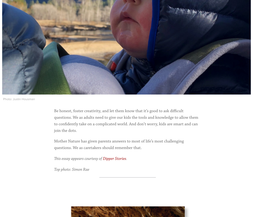


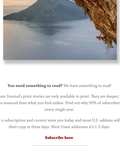
Photo: Leslie Chamberlin

Be honest, foster creativity, and let them know that it's good to ask difficult questions. We as adults need to give our kids the tools and knowledge to allow them to confidently take on a complicated world. And don't worry, kids are smart and can join the dots.

Mother Nature has given parents answers to most of life's most challenging questions. We as caretakers should remember that.

This essay appears courtesy of Dipper Stories.

Top photo: Simon Rae



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REPLY

Sam on February 9, 2020 at 9:00 am:

ninety years ago, while driving with my 10 year old and his 3 year old sister I had Sarah Williams on the truck radio. of Sarah sang the word gap in a song and my 10 year old son looked up at me and muttered, "is that pot gay?" I caught my off guard and I can't recall how I responded……. gay in the 50's was not a description for sexual orientation!

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