

Children Plant Trees, Learn Valuable Lessons

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The indiscriminate exploitation of nature over the years has created an environmental imbalance for the planet. So even as the protection and conservation of the environment become a matter of prime consideration, we have not been able to rise above seminars, speeches and sloganeering and are continuing to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. It is important that every aspect of the environment be linked to its protection. We will continue to struggle with this problem until people of every age, especially children, are made aware of the importance of conserving the environment and are involved in it.

Environment protection must be linked with activity-based teaching in primary classes. Children have to be told about the environment in simple words and in their first language. For this, we have to develop in them an understanding of the environment at a conceptual level by connecting them with their surroundings, classroom activities and processes outside the classroom.

Practical ideas

In an upper primary school, the teachers, along with the children, planted trees in schools, the village and surrounding treeless hills; they watered and manured them as a part of their day-to-day activities and understood the importance of trees in our lives. It took several months of preparation to start this work before which the school did various activities with the children to take this work forward.

During the rainy season, the teachers along with the children planted trees on the school premises. A function was organised on this day. Education Department officials and local public representatives were also invited to the tree planting ceremony. For a few months, these trees grew well. But when they did not get water during the fifteen days of winter vacation, all the trees were destroyed. This led to the realisation that merely planting trees as the fulfilment of one's duty towards environmental conservation was not enough.

During the next rainy season, the Education Department directed schools to plant trees on their premises. An independent organisation also contacted the school for planting trees. But looking at the plight of the trees planted in the previous year, teachers felt that the matter should be discussed with the children: the trees should be planted only if they were willing to take full responsibility for the trees. The issue was discussed with the children elected to the *Bal Panchayat*, which had started functioning by this time. The children agreed to take the responsibility of planting and maintaining trees and the following points were discussed:

1. Which trees to plant? The children knew the answer to this because they had seen the trees that grew easily in their surroundings and recognised those that were not eaten by animals, like goats, etc. The children told us that goats do not eat custard apple trees.
2. A team of children from each class was formed to water the trees every day and on holidays and the responsibility of this job was given to the environmental *panch* of the *Bal Panchayat*.
3. To protect the trees from animals, the teachers at the school took responsibility for arranging bamboo tree-guards.

A day before the planting of trees, children decided on a class-wise location for planting trees and dug the pits. Since the school was in a rural setting, most of the children knew how wide and deep the pit should be. The villagers had also come to know about the plantation drive in the school from the children, and they too came to help. On the appointed day, children planted *neem*, *peepal*, guava, *jamun* and custard apple trees according to their choice.

The teachers were constantly talking informally about the trees in the morning assembly and classrooms. The children were also very alert. They even started coming to school half an hour early to water the trees. If the resources for watering the trees, like buckets, etc., were in short supply, they would even bring these from their homes. They

keenly observed the progress of the trees daily; they brought manure and adjusted the tree guard. In this way, their bond with the trees and concern for their safety began and grew.

Continuing the good work

This work continued even during the holidays. But the teachers were worried about the six weeks long summer vacation when the children would go to their relatives' place. The matter was discussed with the children, and they found a solution. There were some children in the class who were not going anywhere and were ready to look after the trees. The children also said that since everyone would go at different times, they would take turns watering the trees. As a result, the children kept the trees alive in the most difficult times, that is, when the trees needed water the most. In this way, the interest in environmental education was developed in the children without any formal teaching.

In the next rainy season, this programme was extended further. After talking to the children, it was decided that trees should be planted around the hill near the school and also in the students' homes. The children were very excited. But there was the challenge of protecting the trees from animals and the problem of water availability on the hill. Since everyone had bulls, goats, buffaloes, cows, etc., in their homes, it was decided that before planting trees in the houses, the whole family should be consulted. The experiment with trees in the school was successful, so the villagers were also ready to plant trees in their homes. The

children took the responsibility of watering and maintaining the trees. Then, the trees were planted with the help of the Forest Department and a local, independent organisation.

With regard to the trees on the hill, it was decided that custard apple trees should be planted there because, as mentioned earlier, goats do not eat them. For water supply, a hand pump on the temple on the hill was repaired with the help of the *panchayat*, and the children took on the responsibility of these trees also.

The teachers, children and their parents also took part in this activity, and the work went on uninterrupted. Now not only were the teachers discussing trees, their conservation and benefits in the classroom but the children and their families were also fully involved.

Effect of COVID-19

But another challenge was yet to come from circumstances beyond anyone's control – the pandemic. Everyone stopped coming out of their homes during COVID-19. The trees in the houses remained safe, but the trees in school and on the hill were destroyed due to the lack of water and care.

However, during this whole process, it was evident that if there is complete participation of the children in any activity, and the children are given the right to make decisions and these decisions are respected, then children can easily understand and get involved in environmental conversations.



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