



SERIES 2 · PLAY, WONDER, AND LEARNING

Wonder Together: Nature Stories and Empathy

How nature stories can invite perspective-taking while children learn to distinguish observation from imagination and ask rather than assume.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 2 - Play, Wonder, and Learning | 20-22 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 20-22 minutes

Central idea: Imaginative stories can invite children to consider a viewpoint beyond their own. The deeper practice is learning to distinguish observation from imagination, ask rather than assume, listen to what another person communicates, and revise our understanding.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Use safe objects, photographs, and stories as prompts for perspective-taking.
- 2 Follow a Wonder Cycle: notice, wonder, investigate, and reflect.
- 3 Keep imaginative projection separate from facts about people, animals, and nature.
- 4 Practice empathy through listening, consent, boundaries, and responsive action.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

NATURE-OBJECT AND EMOTIONAL-SAFETY NOTE

Use an adult-curated selection of legal, clean, intact objects too large for the child to swallow. Exclude batteries, magnets, rubber bands, long strings, plastic film, sharp or splintered pieces, unknown plants or mushrooms, animal remains or droppings, and anything contaminated by chemicals, raw foods, mold, or unsafe allergens. Follow all local collection

rules and leave living things and habitats undisturbed. In the United States, possession of feathers from most native birds generally requires authorization - even when feathers were naturally shed - so use photographs or drawings instead. Emotion stories should remain invitational. Do not use them to pressure a child to disclose personal experiences, assign feelings the child rejects, excuse harmful behavior, or make the child responsible for an adult's emotions.

Begin with Observation and Imagination

Young children begin life centered in their own immediate experience. They communicate hunger, discomfort, interest, excitement, fatigue, and frustration long before they can explain those states in words.

Over time, children gradually learn that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, knowledge, preferences, and needs. They may notice when another child cries, see that a family member wants something different, or discover that two people can interpret the same event in different ways.

This growing social understanding is one foundation for empathy.

Stories offer a playful place to practice looking beyond one viewpoint. A stone might become a character who has traveled

for centuries. A pinecone might narrate an imaginary winter. A photograph of a feather might inspire a story about flight.

These stories do not prove what a stone, tree, bird, or another person actually experiences. Their value lies in practicing a question:

“What else might be possible from a viewpoint different from mine?”

Empathy goes further. With people, it includes listening to what they communicate and responding to their actual needs rather than treating our imaginative guess as truth.

Big Idea: Empathy Is Curious, Not Certain

Observation can open the door to understanding. Before making an interpretation, children can notice words or other communication, tone and pace, facial expression when it is a useful clue, and body movement or stillness. They can also consider what happened before and after, changes in a familiar pattern, and direct statements about preference, feeling, or need.

No single clue tells us exactly what another person feels. People express emotion differently across temperament, culture, disability, neurotype, age, and situation. Someone may smile when nervous, avoid eye contact while listening closely, use few facial expressions, communicate through a device,

need time before answering, or experience several feelings at once.

Use tentative language:

- “They **might** be disappointed.”
- “I noticed they became quiet.”
- “We do not know yet.”
- “Could we ask what would help?”

Empathy is not mind-reading. It combines curiosity with humility: *my first interpretation may be incomplete, and the other person's voice matters more than my guess.*

Prepare a Safe Wonder Basket

Nature-story activities sometimes use stones, pinecones, feathers, twigs, acorns, shells, seed pods, and leaves. Several of these may be choking hazards, protected by law, contaminated, sharp, or ecologically inappropriate to collect.

Create a safer basket using a small adult-inspected selection:

- one large, smooth stone collected where permitted;
- one intact pinecone too large to swallow, if lawful and safe to collect;
- a sturdy leaf already fallen in a place where collection is allowed;

- a large shell obtained legally and ethically;
- nature photographs, postcards, or field-guide images;
- drawings made during an outdoor observation; or
- familiar child-safe story figures.

Photographs can be especially useful. They preserve the observation while leaving feathers, nests, fungi, plants, animals, and habitat where they belong.

Inspect each physical object before every use. Keep it out of reach when not supervised, particularly when younger siblings or pets share the home.

Place the items on a mat and pause:

- What do you notice?
- Which object or image catches your attention?
- Which details can we see, touch safely, count, or compare?
- Which questions are factual?
- Which ideas belong to an imaginary story?

The goal is not to select the most interesting object. It is to practice looking closely before deciding what it means.

Begin with a Gentle Transition

A familiar transition can help a family slow down. Using the tune of *Here We Go 'Round the Mulberry Bush*, try a line such as:

This is the way we share our words, when we wonder together.

If songs do not fit, choose another beginning:

- place the Wonder Basket on its mat;
- take one quiet breath together without requiring anyone to close their eyes;
- open a sketchbook;
- look at one photograph; or
- say, “Would anyone like to tell or hear a wonder story?”

Participation should be optional. A child may listen, arrange objects, draw, communicate without speech, offer one sentence, tell a long story, or choose a different activity.

Quiet bodies are not required for imagination. Some children think best while moving, fidgeting, looking away, or using a sensory support.

Listen Before Adding the Adult's Story

Once someone chooses a prompt, allow time to observe. Resist immediately supplying the plot.

Try:

- “What detail do you want to start with?”
- “Would you like to tell the story, have me begin, or make it together?”
- “Is this a true-information story, a pretend story, or a mixture?”

If the child chooses imagination, preserve the frame:

- “Suppose this stone were a character. What might it say?”
- “In our pretend story, what does the pinecone remember?”
- “If this photograph could tell a story, where might it begin?”

Words such as *suppose*, *imagine*, *pretend*, and *in our story* keep symbolic play distinct from claims about the actual object or organism.

The adult can listen without evaluating. Instead of “*What a good story,*” reflect a detail:

“In your story, the stone has been searching for the river.”

That response shows attention while leaving ownership with the child.

Let “I Don't Know” Open the Next Question

Children may ask:

- Why do some pinecones open and others stay closed?

- How old is this rock?
- Why do different birds build different nests?
- Where did this shell come from?

If you do not know, say so. Then distinguish possible next steps:

- **Imagine:** “What are some story answers we could invent?”
- **Predict:** “What do we think we may discover?”
- **Investigate:** “Where could we find reliable information?”
- **Observe again:** “What could we notice tomorrow or in another season?”

Possible sources include a librarian, park naturalist, museum, field guide, university extension program, government wildlife agency, or another reputable resource. A family member or neighbor may offer valuable experience, while the family can still verify factual claims when accuracy matters.

Learning together does not mean every question needs immediate research. Keep a wonder page and return when interest and capacity allow.

Give an Object a Voice Without Confusing It with Empathy

Personifying a stone or pinecone can support symbolic play, narrative language, and exploration of themes such as belonging, fear, courage, fairness, or change.

It is not the same as understanding another person's actual perspective. An inanimate object cannot confirm or correct the story. People can - and their communication deserves priority.

Use object stories as rehearsal for possibilities, then make the bridge explicit:

“We invented what the stone might say. If we wonder how a person feels, what could we do besides guessing?”

Possible answers include noticing without judging, asking respectfully, and listening to the person's words or communication. Care also includes accepting *“I don't want to talk,”* offering choices instead of taking over, and changing our response after learning more.

This distinction protects imagination while teaching an essential boundary: empathy includes respect for another person's authority over their own experience.

Make Room for Different Empathy Styles

Children show care in many ways. One may name a feeling quickly. Another may notice a practical need. Another may offer a toy, give space, get an adult, follow a stated boundary, or remember a preference later.

Do not require eye contact, a particular facial expression, physical affection, immediate emotional language, shared distress, or imaginative storytelling as proof of empathy. Do not require an apology before the child has enough regulation and understanding to consider what happened.

A child can care deeply without displaying emotion in an expected way. Perspective-taking and emotional language also develop gradually and can vary across situations.

Focus on responsive action:

- Did the child notice or listen?
- Did they respect “no” or “stop”?
- Could they ask what might help?
- Did they seek support when a situation exceeded their ability?
- Could they repair harm with guidance?

Empathy should expand respect, not become another performance standard.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one safe object or nature photograph. Ask:

- 1 “What can we actually observe?”
- 2 “What could we imagine for a story?”
- 3 “How are observation and imagination different?”

Keep the conversation short enough to follow the child's interest.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Are the nature materials safe, lawful, and ecologically respectful?
- Am I labeling an idea as observation, prediction, or imagination?
- Do I treat my interpretation of another person's feeling as a possibility rather than a fact?
- Can my child participate without speech, eye contact, or storytelling?
- What forms of care does my child already show?

Curiosity becomes empathic when it leaves room for another person's real answer.

Learn Together Through the Wonder Cycle

Grow Curiosity About Living Things

Once children enjoy imagined object stories, they may begin asking about living things:

- What is the robin looking for?
- How does a squirrel locate stored food?
- What has changed around this old tree?
- Why do earthworms appear near the surface after rain?

These questions invite both imagination and factual learning. Keep the two in conversation:

“We can invent a story about what the robin is thinking. We can also observe its behavior and learn what robins commonly eat.”

Animals have needs and experiences, but people can easily misread their behavior. Do not approach, feed, touch, capture, or disturb wildlife in order to check a story. Observe from a safe distance and consult reliable information.

Plants and ecosystems are living systems worthy of care, even though talking about a tree's “feelings” belongs to metaphor or imagination rather than established fact.

Perspective-taking with nature should nurture humility: living systems are not props, and human interpretations remain limited.

Follow the Wonder Cycle

The **Wonder Cycle** is a four-part family practice:

- 1 **Notice.** What can we observe?
- 2 **Wonder.** What questions, predictions, or stories arise?
- 3 **Investigate.** How could we learn more?
- 4 **Reflect.** What changed in our understanding?

The cycle can be used with nature, books, cooking, museums, family history, building projects, and everyday problems. When used with another person's experience, add a crucial principle: whenever possible, ask and listen rather than investigating someone as though they were an object of study.

1. Notice

Begin with description rather than interpretation:

- “Their voice became quieter.”
- “The bird flew repeatedly between the ground and one branch.”
- “This pinecone has open scales.”
- “The character moved away from the group.”

Ask:

- What did we see, hear, read, or experience?
- What changed?
- Which details are direct observations?
- What information are we missing?

2. Wonder

Generate more than one possibility:

- What might explain this?
- Could there be another reason?
- What does each person in the story know?
- What are we assuming?
- Which idea is pretend, and which is a testable prediction?

No question is inherently silly, but questions can still be intrusive, unsafe, or based on stereotypes. Adults can guide respectfully: *“That is something private. We can ask a broader question without guessing about their body or identity.”*

3. Investigate

Match the method to the question:

- ask the person directly, if appropriate;
- read a reliable book or source;

- consult a qualified professional, cultural knowledge keeper, or specialist;
- observe again without disturbing;
- compare several sources;
- conduct a simple, safe experiment; or
- accept that some questions cannot or should not be answered.

When learning about a culture, disability, community, or identity, prioritize people from that group and avoid treating one individual's experience as universal.

4. Reflect

Return to the original observation:

- What surprised us?
- Which assumption changed?
- What remains uncertain?
- Did the person tell us something different from our guess?
- What new question appeared?
- Does anything in our behavior need to change?

Reflection turns curiosity into learning because it requires updating the story - not merely collecting information that confirms the first idea.

Conduct a Wonder Interview

Family members may “interview” a nature object as imaginative play while clearly naming the frame.

Choose one safe object, photograph, or story figure. One person becomes the interviewer; another speaks **as the imagined character**.

Possible prompts:

- In this story, where have you been?
- What do you enjoy?
- What has been difficult?
- What would you like others to understand?
- What do you hope happens next?

Then switch roles or change the prompt.

Offer alternatives for children who do not want to role-play:

- draw a scene;
- select from picture choices;
- arrange objects to show what happened;
- dictate one sentence;
- listen and ask a question; or
- investigate a factual question about the object.

Do not use a playful interview as a disguised attempt to obtain disclosure: *“Tell me what the sad stone’s parent did.”* If a child’s story raises a genuine safety concern, respond calmly and follow appropriate safeguarding procedures rather than pressing the metaphor for details.

Practice Reflective Listening Without Rewriting

At the end of a story, reflect what you actually heard:

- “In your story, Rocky wanted to stay near the river.”
- “You imagined that winter felt difficult for the pinecone character.”
- “I heard you say the bird wanted everyone to leave its nest alone.”

These phrases keep the adult inside the child’s imaginative frame.

If reflecting the child’s own experience, check your understanding:

- “It sounds as though you felt left out. Did I understand?”
- “You became quiet when the game changed. Do you want to tell me what that was like?”
- “Would you like listening, help solving the problem, or some space?”

The child may correct the adult. Welcome the correction:

“Thank you for telling me. I guessed wrong.”

Reflective listening is not repeating words mechanically. It is demonstrating that the speaker's meaning matters more than the listener's first interpretation.

Move from Feeling to Need and Boundary

Empathy does not mean agreeing with every action or removing necessary limits.

An adult can understand a child's frustration and still prevent harm:

“You wanted the toy and felt angry when it was unavailable. I will not let you hit. We can move back, ask for a turn, or choose something else while you wait.”

Similarly, understanding why another person acted a certain way does not require excusing cruelty, coercion, discrimination, or unsafe behavior.

Teach children that care includes noticing impact, respecting consent, stopping when someone says stop, and seeking adult help. It also includes setting boundaries, repairing what can be repaired, and keeping oneself safe.

Empathy should not require a child to remain close to someone who hurts or frightens them.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults may believe their role is to answer children's questions. A more enduring role is modeling how to hold a question responsibly.

Sometimes that means saying *“I don't know.”* Sometimes it means finding a reliable source. Sometimes it means asking the person concerned. Sometimes it means recognizing that the information is private or unknowable.

Every thoughtful *“Let's find out”* can model humility and persistence. Every respectful *“We don't need to know that”* can model boundaries. Every *“I was mistaken”* can model revision.

Children are not only collecting facts. They are learning what curious people do with uncertainty.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Use the Wonder Cycle with a character in a familiar story:

- **Notice:** What did the character say or do?
- **Wonder:** What are two possible explanations?
- **Investigate:** What else in the story gives us information?
- **Reflect:** Did our first idea change?

Fiction provides practice without asking a child to analyze a real person who has not consented.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Do we generate more than one possible explanation?
- Does our investigation fit the question and respect privacy?
- Can the child correct my reflection without resistance from me?
- Am I pairing empathy with boundaries and accountability?
- What did I revise after learning more?

Wonder deepens understanding when we are willing to change our minds.

Let Wonder Help Us Care

Share Wonder Stories

Invite each family member to choose one adult-approved nature object, photograph, story figure, or illustrated card.

Take turns offering an imaginary story. Prompts may include:

- Where has this character been?
- What happened along the way?
- What challenge appeared?
- Who or what offered help?
- What did the character want others to understand?
- What might happen next?

There are no correct plots. Every person may notice different details and create a different perspective.

Keep participation flexible. A family member may:

- tell a complete story;
- add one sentence;
- draw;
- use gestures or a communication device;
- arrange objects;
- ask questions;
- listen; or
- pass.

Afterward, ask:

- Which detail surprised you?
- Where did two stories interpret the same object differently?
- Did listening give you a new idea?
- Which parts were imaginary, and what factual question remains?
- How could we learn more without disturbing nature?

Different perspectives can enrich understanding, but not every perspective is equally informed or harmless. If a story repeats a stereotype or devalues someone, address it calmly:

“That idea could hurt people because it treats a whole group as though everyone is the same. What information or voice are we missing?”

Curiosity and care include examining the stories we inherit, not only celebrating every story uncritically.

Give Perspective-Taking and Empathy Shared Language

Two words capture the heart of this brief:

- **Perspective-taking:** Considering how a situation may look from a viewpoint different from one's own while recognizing that our understanding may be incomplete.
- **Empathy:** Trying to understand another person's experience and responding with care, respect, or appropriate support.

For animals, people can observe behavior, learn about species needs, and act with care while remaining cautious about assigning human emotions. For plants and ecosystems, care can be grounded in ecological knowledge and respect without claiming they think or feel as humans do.

Use the words in real situations:

- “We each had a different perspective on the story.”
- “You asked before helping. That made room for their perspective.”

- “You stopped when they said no. That was a caring response.”
- “We thought he was angry, but he told us he was concentrating. We updated our understanding.”

Connect Empathy with Story

One suggested storybook connection is ***Stick and Stone*** by Beth Ferry, illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld.

The story explores friendship, exclusion, courage, and support through personified objects. It offers a clear imaginary setting for discussing how characters respond to one another.

After reading, ask:

- What did each character notice?
- Which actions had an impact on someone else?
- How did the characters show care?
- Did helping require courage or a boundary?
- What might each character say about the same event?
- Which parts of our interpretation are supported by the words or pictures?

Move beyond identifying a feeling. Ask what action helped, whether it was wanted, and what repair might look like.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

We may care more wisely when we wonder before assuming.

Compassion can begin with curiosity, but curiosity alone is not enough. Care becomes more reliable when people observe without rushing to judgment, consider several explanations, and ask when asking is appropriate. They also need to listen to the answer, respect privacy and boundaries, seek accurate information, revise mistaken assumptions, and respond in a way that is actually helpful.

Children do not become compassionate simply because adults tell them to be kind. They learn through being treated with empathy, seeing adults model repair, practicing perspective-taking, and experiencing that another person's "no," correction, or different need matters.

Empathy is not agreement, emotional absorption, or self-sacrifice. It can coexist with limits, accountability, distance, and safety.

Try This

Notice one everyday opportunity to wonder about another person's experience.

Ask:

- What did we actually observe?
- What are two possible interpretations?
- Could we ask the person directly?
- What communication or boundary have they already given us?
- What response would be helpful rather than merely well-intended?
- What did we learn that changed our first idea?

Instead of asking:

“What should we think they feel?”

Try:

“What do we notice, what are we unsure about, and how could we understand respectfully?”

Sometimes the most empathic response is a question. Sometimes it is quiet listening, practical help, space, a boundary, or getting a trusted adult.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Replace one confident feeling label with a tentative observation and invitation.

Instead of: “You're angry.”

Try: “I noticed your voice became louder and you moved away. What is happening for you?”

If the person does not want to answer, respect that while maintaining any necessary safety boundary.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Do I make room for a person to define or withhold their own experience?
- Can care look different from emotional language or physical affection?
- Am I teaching that understanding never excuses harm?
- How do we respond when our help is declined?
- What new understanding changed our action?

Empathy grows through curiosity, correction, boundaries, and responsive care.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Discovering Nature's Rhythms supports careful observation before interpretation. *The Cardboard Box Theater* develops listening, perspective, and child-led storytelling through dramatic play. *The Story Worth Saving* considers how adults can notice and preserve meaningful experiences with consent and respect for privacy. Read together, this package provides

broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Imaginative nature stories can invite children to explore viewpoints beyond their own. They are symbolic play - not evidence of what an object, plant, animal, or person actually experiences.

The Wonder Cycle helps families move from observation to possibility, from possibility to investigation, and from investigation to revised understanding.

With people, empathy requires more than guessing. It asks us to listen to direct communication, accept correction, respect boundaries, and respond to what is actually needed.

Children may show empathy through words, practical help, restraint, attention, repair, or seeking support. They do not need to perform eye contact, affection, distress, or instant emotional insight to demonstrate care.

We may care more wisely when we wonder before assuming - and remain willing to change our minds.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

The ideas in this brief draw on social-emotional development, perspective-taking, pretend play, reflective communication, nature study, and relationship-centered caregiving.

Emotional Development and Communication

- 1 **American Academy of Pediatrics: Communication Skills Start at Home.** Discusses active and reflective listening, acknowledging a child's perspective, modeling empathy, and using creative play and stories to explore feelings.
- 2 **American Academy of Pediatrics: Improving Family Communications.** Encourages listening carefully, showing empathy,

respecting feelings, and avoiding telling a child what they think or feel.

- 3 **CDC: Milestones in Action - Age Two.** Includes noticing when others are hurt or upset as one social-emotional milestone commonly observed by age two. Development varies; milestone resources are not substitutes for individualized screening or evaluation.
- 4 **John H. Flavell, writings on children's knowledge about the mind.** Flavell's developmental research examines how children gradually learn that people can hold different knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives.

Nature Stories and Material Safety

- 1 **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Feathers and the Law.** Explains that U.S. law generally prohibits unauthorized possession of feathers from protected native migratory birds, including naturally molted feathers.
- 2 **U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: Small Parts Ban and Choking-Hazard Labeling.** Explains why small parts present particular choking, aspiration, and ingestion risks to children under three.

Compassionate Dialogue

- 1 **Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.** Rosenberg offers a practitioner framework for separating observations from evaluations and attending to feelings, needs, requests, and empathy. Use it as one communication approach rather than a substitute for developmental, clinical, cultural, or safeguarding expertise.

Together, these perspectives support a careful conclusion: storytelling and wondering can provide practice in considering possibilities, while real empathy depends on responsive relationships, direct communication, respect for boundaries, and the willingness to revise assumptions.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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