

Droste and Godiva

*Waldorf Curriculum
Preschool Newsletter*

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ACTIVITIES

As you well know, spending time with children is always rewarding. It can help you to see the world around you in a whole new way and to value things that you may take for granted or consider perfectly ordinary. On the other hand, when you are entirely responsible for their care, even small children can be intimidating. Just what do you do with them all day? This newsletter is here to help – whether you're a parent, grandparent, babysitter, caregiver, neighbor, or anyone acting as a substitute teacher and spending the day with a preschool-aged child.

Many families also use the weekly newsletter topics in their regular lesson planning, completing the entire group of activities as a homeschooling unit.

The following sections will give some suggested activities for this week's theme as well as methodology and ideas for preparation.

Opening Verse

The Waldorf method places a strong emphasis on establishing rhythms throughout the day to give a comfortable sense of order and security to a child's life. One of these is to start your day (or your time together) with a short meditation called an opening verse. Choose a place which is clean and orderly; children are deeply sensitive to their environments and are unable to feel calm in the midst of chaos. Lighting a candle while you say the verse is customary, as this helps to establish a reflective atmosphere. Even if you choose not to do light a candle, the opening verse will be a transition for the child into your care. After you declare yourselves to be "ready now for work and learning", you can blow out the candle and begin your day!

Opening Verse:
In the morning at the sunrise
When the light of day doth break,
Children's souls, by angels guided,
Sleep from rested body shake,
Ready now for work and learning,
Happy, steady, and awake.

Background

When I was still in high school, I worked for the Calvert Marine Museum here in Solomons, Maryland when they were just opening up a new exhibit: river otters. The marine biologist here named the two females Droste and Godiva. After the exhibit had been open for a while, the public was allowed to suggest names for the otters and the names Bubbles and Squeak were chosen. But those of us who were there at the beginning still know them by their "real" names.

Working with river otters was amazing. They are very powerful and not toys – no wild animal is a toy! I remember saying how cute they were and Paula reprimanded me, saying a river otter can bite right through a man’s wrist. We always had to be very careful around them. They were fed a diet of big cat food (that’s ground horse meat) with vitamin supplements mixed in. That was pretty unappealing to prepare. And they got whole dead fish as snacks.

My daughter and I went to visit the river otter exhibit last weekend, which inspired the writing of this topic. They are still the same, sleek and playful. The exhibit has three parts. One is a window into the behind-the-scenes view of their cages and the area where they are weighed and any necessary medical procedures are done. The cages are where they sleep at night. The otters know when they hear the keeper banging around that it most likely means food! When we were there, they were brought inside and fed their snacks. The keeper doesn’t put her fingers near the otters; she holds a fish partway through the mesh and the otter comes up and grabs at it.

From the interior area, the otters have a small tunnel which leads them to their outdoor habitats. This can be opened and shut (thus the clanging sound). The door is shut most of the time during the day so that the otters stay outside and can be viewed. And boy do they love their public! When we went outside to see them, they were napping in their dry area, which is a section with dirt, branches and logs to climb on and a large hollow log to nap in. And they were napping when we arrived. Two curled-up otters don’t take up much space so they were hard to see. When we came back, Droste and Godiva were awake and hurriedly climbed the branch “ramp” into their wet habitat. This is a huge naturalistic pool, also with toys to play with and things to climb on. The otters swim and dive, slide and splash, play with one another, alone, and with the person watching. They love to come up the plexiglass sides, look you right in the eye, and then flip over (heels over head) and swim off, then come back to take another peek.

Otters are known for being playful, so much so that scientists aren’t sure when they stop playing to teach their young any survival skills! Sliding on their stomachs down grassy hills and muddy or icy slopes is what river otters are best known for. In some areas of the United States and Canada otters are still very common; in others, they were overhunted for their pelts and their numbers are greatly reduced. Because so many still live around the Patuxent River, trapping is allowed in my area. River otters do not hibernate – they love the cold weather! They simply move from eating mostly crayfish (as in the summer) to an all-fish diet. And the occasional rabbit or frog.

Find more information about river otters in the Appendix.

Stories

Otters Under Water
River Otter at Autumn Lane
How Rabbit Tricked Otter:
and other Cherokee animal stories
Oscar Otter

by Jim Arnosky
by Laura Gates Galvin

by Gayle Ross
by Nathaniel Benchley

Field Trip

Your child will have the most fun with this topic if he or she is able to see a real live river otter. Check for museums or zoos near you which may have this type of exhibit. Because river otters are so playful, friendly, and crowd-pleasing, they are a common animal to find on display. Of course, if you live in an area where river otters can be found in the wild, you can take a canoe trip down the river and try to spot one. Even if you don't (they are most active at dawn and dusk) it will still benefit your child to see the actual habitat of a river otter.

The Baby Einstein series of Animal Discovery Cards has an excellent picture of a river otter. You may want to look at this card both before and after going to see one for yourselves. Even after you are done with this topic, occasionally set the card out or have it accessible for your child to look at and talk about.

Music & Movement:

Bubbles

The first thing you are likely to notice about a river otter as it swims is the long trail of tiny bubbles streaming out behind. Give your child a bubble wand (the smaller the better in this case) and some bubble solution and let her run around blowing bubbles and pretending to be a river otter swimming.

How to Make Bubble Solution

Gently mix 1/2 cup (500 mL) liquid dishwater detergent, 4-1/2 cups (4.5 L) water, and 4 tablespoons glycerin (60 mL) in container. Skim foam from the top before use.

You may want to do this activity outdoors on a warm day instead of indoors, since bubble solution on your floor will make it slippery.

Scarves

Another way for your child to mimic the graceful swooping movements of a river otter in the water is with scarves. Give your child a long silk scarf and she can dance around the living room twisting, turning, diving, and darting back and forth.

Water Music



One Room Schoolhouse:

If you have any recording of nature sounds, such as the sound of water trickling in a stream, or the animals of the forest, your child will probably like to have this on in the background while pretending to be an otter. Another option is to have an older child compose a piece of music on their instrument of study which represents the habitat of the river otter. A dulcimer is particularly nice for this.

Performance Art

Perhaps your older child and your younger child (or children) can put on a piece of performance art for the family, combining the exuberant bubble-blowing, the graceful movements of the scarf dancing, and the musical composition of the older child. You could even go so far as to have a special piece of music for the downtime, and your little otter could curl up and go to sleep at the end of his performance.

Play

River otters play almost all of the time (except when they're sleeping). And they are perpetually curious. Remind you of a preschool-aged child? Try some of the following otter-inspired games with your child.

Curiosity Games

Take a button or other small object in one hand. Hold both hands behind your back so that the child cannot see them. Move the button back and forth between the two hands then bring them out to the front of you, concealing which hand holds the button. See if the child can guess the correct hand. Now let her try. This game is good for indoor play when the weather gets cold.

Hide and Go-Seek is another good option. Do you have a curiosity game to share? We always encourage you to post additional suggestions to the Group!

Observation Game

In order to survive in the wild, otters have to be constantly alert. They learn to notice whenever anything is unusual or out of place. The following game is quoted from an interview with Stephen Lankton:

http://www.erickson-foundation.org/Newsletter-old/i_lankto.htm

Carol and I have made a game out of cleaning the house. We tell the children, "You are pretty smart and you are also pretty observant but I bet we are more observant." To allow the children to prove how smart they are, we first have them organize the room. Once everything is in place, the children leave the room and I secretly move five things out of place. For instance, I might take a lid off a jar or lay a sock over the lamp. In turn, we let the children do this with us. The winner is the one who notices the most out of place items and of course puts them where they belong. The children fully participate in the room cleaning because this is part of an enjoyable game. Even more important, this helps strengthen perceptual and cognitive skills such as discrimination and attention to detail. If children don't have that skill, they can't clean their rooms.

Sliding & Sledding

No list of otter games can be complete without sliding and sledding! If snow has already come to your area, going sledding with the child is a natural choice. Lying on your stomach on a toboggan is the closest to sliding like an otter. Of course, there are sliding boards at the playground, too, if you don't have snow yet. This activity goes well with the book Oscar the Otter.

Follow the Leader

Otters generally get along with one another. One game they like to play is Follow the Leader. To play this game with your child, simply start moving. The child has to imitate everything you do. Try a funny walk, clapping or stomping, marching around in circles, or any other activity that would be fun to imitate. Then let your child take a turn at being the leader.

Games in the Tub

Because otters are in the water nearly constantly, many of their games are simply playing with objects they find in the water. Playing with and exploring any kind of tub toy is also a natural for young children. For a special challenge, make a "fish" for your young otter to catch (see Handwork project, below).

Handwork

Catching a fish with your bare hands is tricky. They are perpetually suspended in the water (only a few fish lie on the bottom or bury themselves in sand and silt) and since the water is constantly moving they often slip out of reach. To make a "fish" for your child to play with in the bathtub (or at any time) find a completely watertight bottle. Fill it with just enough water that it neither rises to the surface nor sinks to the bottom. This takes patience and can be a lot of fun!

Nature Walk

Mud or snow can provide a valuable source of animal tracks. If you live in an area where river otters can be found naturally, take a nature walk with your child to look for tracks. A good guidebook for this is Field Guide to Animal Tracks.

Storytelling

Read (or listen to the recording of) How Rabbit Tricked Otter. Then use the Folkmanis River Otter Puppet to retell the story to your child, from the otter's point of view.

Folkmanis puppets are very high quality and this one is especially realistic and well done: <http://www.folkmanis.com/aquatic.htm>

Closing Verse

Use this verse to end your time together on a high note, striving to go forth and made the rest of the day a good one. Like the opening verse, lighting a candle is customary and provides a sense of closure. When the candle is blown out, you will go forward feeling positive about the next thing to come your way.

The golden sun so great and bright
Warms the world with all its might.
It makes the dark earth green and fair,
Attends each thing with ceaseless care.
It shines on blossom, stone, and tree,
On bird and beast, on you and me.
So may each deed throughout the day,
May everything we do and say
Be bright and strong and true,
Oh, golden sun, like you!

OTHER IDEAS

Cooking

Because many children and families have restricted diets such as vegan or vegetarian, gluten-free, kosher, etc. we generally do not suggest specific cooking activities for the week's theme. However, cooking is always a wonderful activity for a child to participate in. Bearing in mind any food allergies, and common-sense kitchen safety, consider preparing a simple recipe with the child. Children love to wash vegetables, measure and mix ingredients, and set the table for a meal. Preparing and eating a snack is always popular!

Independent Play

Don't forget the many benefits of unguided imaginative play. You need to stay nearby for safety's sake, if the child is in an unfamiliar environment or you aren't certain what should or should not be childproofed. All children need daily time to play. In the preschool years, play is the WORK of the young child. Prepare an appropriate play space and then stay out of it as much as you can; give the child the simplest and highest quality toys you can find such as large pieces of cloth, blocks, dolls, and materials from nature (such as pinecones, feathers, or shells). Avoid plastic toys. Consider a basin of water and some measuring cups or add some dish detergent and give the child a whisk. The more open-ended a material, the more of the child will be brought forth in playing with it. The more structured a material, the less will be required of the child – and the less he will grow and develop when playing with it. As a simple test, try playing with the toys yourself. If you find you tire of a thing quickly, so will a child!

Helping

Helping around the home is an essential part of any Waldorf preschool curriculum. It is not necessary to put a child in front of the television while you do the dishes or sort the laundry into lights and darks; let the child help you. Even if you have an automatic dishwasher, a child can help by rinsing the dishes before they are loaded. Children love to do work that they know is truly helpful and all young children thrive in situations where they are allowed to imitate an adult. Washing the dog, washing the car, sweeping or dusting, repotting houseplants, feeding the cats, setting and clearing the table... all of these are wonderful activities to do with a preschool-aged child.

PLANNER

Activities: highlight the activities you would like to do

Opening Verse

Stories

- Otters Under Water by Jim Arnosky
- River Otter at Autumn Lane by Laura Gates Galvin
- How Rabbit Tricked Otter:
and other Cherokee animal stories by Gayle Ross
- Oscar Otter by Nathaniel Benchley

Field Trip

- Baby Einstein: Animal Discovery Cards by Julie Aigner-Clark

Music & Movement

- bubbles
- scarves
- water music
- performance art

Play

- curiosity games
- observation game
- sliding & sledding
- follow the leader
- games in the tub

Handwork

Nature Walk

- A Field Guide to Animal Tracks by Olaus J. Murie

Storytelling

- Folkmanis River Otter Puppet

Cooking

Independent Play

Helping

Closing Verse

PLANNER

Book List: list the books you will be reading

Materials: list all materials required for your chosen activities

APPENDIX: NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER

Lutra canadensis

River otters originally lived throughout much of the United States in both fresh and brackish rivers and marshes. Trapping, pollution, and loss of habitat have drastically reduced their range and numbers. The largest population now exists in the remote bayous of Louisiana. Conservation and repopulation efforts are underway to return otters to their former range.

Swimming

- when swimming slowly, otters use their webbed feet and paddle along like a dog
- in pursuit of prey, they tuck back their feet and race at speeds up to 7 mph, twisting and turning their long streamlined bodies with the aid of a strong tapered tail
- when swimming underwater, otters close special valves in their nose and ears and can remain submerged for one to two minutes
- as they swim, some of the air streams from their fur in long strings of bubbles

Play

- all carnivores play when they are young, but otters remain playful even when grown
- they chase after each other wrestling, tumbling, and following the leader
- their most famous activity is sliding down banks of snow, mud, or smooth grass into the water

Heavy Fur Coat

- to keep warm and dry, otters have an extremely dense coat
- a square inch of their fur contains over 300,000 individual hairs. Air trapped among the hairs forms a layer that keeps them dry by preventing water from reaching their skin
- otters must maintain their fur in good condition for survival. They spend a lot of time rubbing their coats dry and grooming themselves and each other

Dens

- otters do not construct their own den. Instead, they often take over one abandoned by a muskrat or other animal. Hollow logs, brush piles, rock overhangs, and similar shelters are also used

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Handwork activity adapted from "Submarines and fish" in Earth Water Fire and Air: Playful explorations in the four elements by Walter Kraul.

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