

“While” away at the window

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With the advent of the Covid pandemic, there have been many restrictions on all of us. In this regard, children who are used to more freedom and the outdoors have been much affected. Despite the parents’ best efforts to keep their children occupied indoors, the children are unfortunately missing their social life. On the one hand, children are probably spending more time with their parents, but on the other they are not meeting their friends and teachers. It takes a great deal of patience and effort to keep children physically, mentally and emotionally occupied with something. Moreover, many adults cannot afford to engage their children all day owing to their domestic and professional responsibilities. It can get exhausting for a parent/guardian. Times like this call for drastic and radical ways of thinking. One really needs to think out of the box to engage children with limited resources.

As someone involved with education, I have been giving some thought to this. As the lockdown affected my work schedules, I found myself working from home for extended hours. And when you work from home, the distractions and responsibilities are more. Particularly, the distractions. The noise from the roads, vehicles honking, the drone of the machine from the nearby bakery, etc. In the midst of all this, I was also able to discern a faint pii pii which I was sure was coming from a bird. For several weeks, this sound found its way to my ears and I was



Photos courtesy: Adithi Muralidhar

always curious to find the source. Soon, my mind learnt to filter the various other sounds and I could pick up the pii pii even amidst the cawing crows and the drone of the machines. One day, after struggling for several minutes to locate the source of that faint sound, my eyes spotted some movement in the rain tree nearby. Something was fluttering from one branch to the other. It was a brownish bird. I knew there were sparrows in the area but somehow this definitely looked smaller than a sparrow. The faint pii pii call was surely coming from that bird. A few more minutes passed and my patience paid off. The bird landed in a clearing, from where I could assert that I wasn't following a sparrow. Long story short, the faint pii pii which I heard almost everyday was from a munia (to be specific a Scaly-breasted Munia). Since I had now seen the bird calling, it stuck in my head. Now, no matter what I am busy with, the pii pii sound seems to filter in from all the other ambient noises. In a matter of weeks, I could easily know when to look for the bird outside because the call would reach my ears before the bird reached my window. I knew the neighbourhood munias were passing by. I had experienced something similar even with another species, the Oriental White-eye. The arrival of the White-eyes outside my window would be preceded by its faint ti-you ti-you. I would get to know they are passing by thanks to my now trained ears which were able to distinguish it from other sounds. I admit, I am a bird lover, but independent of that, I thought this definitely did seem like time well spent. As an advocate of outdoor education, I had thought that the pandemic will really bring such

experiential (outdoor) learning to a standstill. But that is not so. Even this small episode of intently listening to bird calls and then tracing that call back to its source, all the while sitting near my window was an enriching experience. And perhaps this could be one way of keeping children engaged indoors – by directing their attention to the nature present outside their windows. You could be watching a stray dog or the birds that come and drink water from the muddy puddle...the bird that flits from one flower to the next or that faint pii pii!

Watching animals and birds in your environment seems like a story unfolding in front of your eyes. It keeps you occupied, hones your skills of observation, exercises your sensory organs and definitely leaves you craving for more. For three months, I had watched this five year old boy in the neighbouring building spend about two hours in his balcony, in the morning and evening seeing the views outside. Unfortunately for him, much of his view was the building opposite. But the silver lining was that there was some greenery to make up for the excess concrete. As I did some daily chores in the balcony, he would call out and wave a hi to me. Some small talk would follow. His elder brother would accompany him sometimes; they would fight, play



and then gaze out for a while. I also saw the young one's gaze innately being drawn towards flying birds. Keeping a young one engaged all day takes effort and patience. One day, when I saw him seated in his balcony, I directed his attention to a bird (an Oriental Magpie Robin). He extended his neck outside the grill to get a better look. The bird was hidden in the foliage of a nearby tree. He could not spot it but knew it was there, for the bird was calling out loudly. After a couple of minutes, I left as I got busy with other chores. A while later, I happened to glance by chance from my window, and there he was, looking at a Robin foraging on the ground. He had found it! I was left hoping that he continues to observe the winged companions outside his window!

As expressed by many researchers and conservationists, there is a need to awaken the otherwise dwindling curiosity and wonder that young children have for their surroundings and nature. I do believe that we adults should work towards evoking that awe, love and empathy for nature among young children so that when they become adults like us, they are able to awaken their "ecological self". This time of restricted movement and no physical access to schools and teachers may force us, now more than ever, to develop innovative ways to keep young children engaged and immersed in nature despite being confined to the four walls of the house! So

*The term 'ecological self' was coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who laid the foundations of a field of philosophy called "Deep Ecology". Proponents of the "ecological self" argue that having a sense of inter-connectedness with your environment and nature is crucial towards shaping your views towards the natural world and is connected to behaving in more environmentally conscious ways.



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Self-set activities

1. Choose a tree that you can easily see from your window. Observe the same tree at different times of the day over a period of one month. Take down notes about which life-forms (birds, butterflies, etc.) are seen on the tree, at which times of the day and describe what they are doing. At the end of the month, try to list down all the different organisms you saw associated with that tree. This will give you a glimpse of how a single tree can support multiple life forms.
2. In the mornings, when bird calls are more audible, concentrate for some time to figure out how many different types of calls you can listen to. Try to trace the calls to their source.
3. Observe a tree close to your window. Notice when new leaves arrive, how long they remain, how fast they fall off, what colours they change to? When does flowering and fruiting happen?
4. Choose a commonly seen butterfly or bird from your window. Observe it everyday and try to draw it as you see it. You can keep evolving your drawing as your observations keep refining.

"whiling" away at the window may not be a waste of time!

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