

Exploring the world with big eyes and small feet

October 31, 2001

Before we open the door and burst into the sunshine, we quickly review our field-trip rules. What do we need to remember, friends? Safe hands, listening ears, walking feet. Translation: Let's try to get to our destination and back with everyone in one piece.

Taking 2-1/2 and 3-year-olds from the university's preschool on a walk across campus is like trying to herd a dozen puppies. It doesn't matter that they've been on the playground less than an hour before - you'd think they hadn't seen the light of day in a decade.

All of a sudden, we are outside the confines of a small classroom, and everything captures their attention. Their curiosity and energy feed off each other until they are vibrating with anticipation about what lies waiting around the next corner.

Since we adults in the group are charged with safely returning with the same number of children we took out, I become alert to everything that piques their interest: the sparrow perched on a railing, the man walking his bike along a shady path, and the maintenance crew cleaning the courtyard fountain. The faraway sound of an airplane, the drone of the riding lawn mower on the soccer field, and the squeaky hinge on the door to the campus bookstore.

It remains to the teachers to head off collisions with pillars, posts, and other children while 12 sets of eyes dart in all directions. My young friends are refreshingly indiscriminate about what excites them.

"Look, my shadow!" is proclaimed with the same enthusiasm as "Look, a water fountain!" and "Look, a bug!"

I pride myself on being a pretty keen observer of what's going on around me. But what looks to me like an unremarkable trio of students heading to the cafeteria is, to my companions, a collection of delighted observations:

"See, that girl's eating chips!"

"Why he gots that funny hat on?"

"She has a backpack like my mom!"

Taking a walk turns the whole world into our classroom.

"One, two, three, four..." we count in unison as we climb the steps.

"Is that tree taller or shorter than the building?" we ask. "What color are those flowers? What do we do before we cross the street? What sound does the bee make?"

Walking with my Room C friends is not aerobic (unless someone breaks the "Please stay with the group" rule), and is it not particularly calming and meditative. But it is unfailingly fun and eye-opening in the best possible way. With so much talk these days about living mindfully and striving to be present every moment, it is heartening to watch children do it naturally.

Spending time with preschoolers is a never-ending adventure. Seeing the world through their eyes is like putting on rose-colored glasses that bring every cloud and blade of grass into crystalline focus and magnify the magic found in every pebble, brick, and butterfly.

I walk at different times with different people for different reasons. But whether it's an early-morning solo ramble, a jaunt through the park with a friend, or a quiet, predinner stroll with my husband, I've discovered that every trip is enhanced when I imagine that 12 little pairs of walking feet are showing me the way.