

Activating Wonder

Actionable ways to boost wonder for the kids we love and teach.



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Created in joyful collaboration with Monica Parker, author of *The Power of Wonder*.

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About Wonder...

What is wonder?

Wonder is both universal and nuanced. It can help to think of wonder as curiosity plus so much more. It's being present, noticing, questioning, searching, discovering and experiencing awe.

Wonder promotes kids' development across domains as well as their sense of agency, connection and even wellness. Kids engage in wonder so naturally when they're young, but that often diminishes as they grow. But does it have to?!



"If a child is to keep alive their inborn sense of wonder ... they need the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with them the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

--Rachel Carson

Why wonder?

Wonder is a beautiful human experience, as universal as our core emotions. It is also a powerful tool for deep learning. The learning we do while in a state of wonder burns brighter and lasts longer. Wonder also tends to make us more empathetic and lead us to a full experience of life.

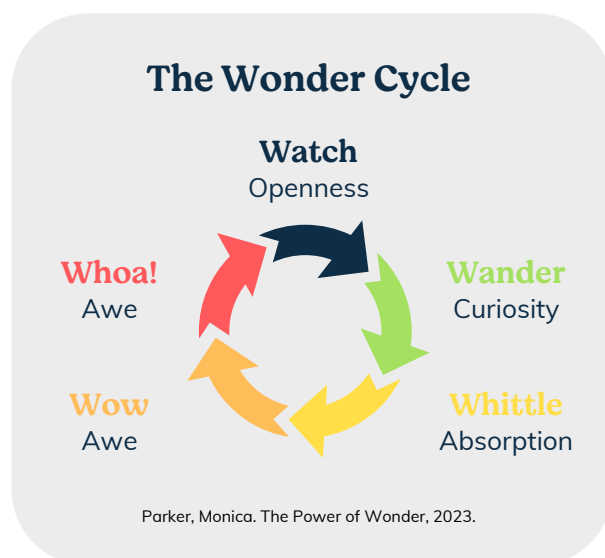
If we want to prepare kids to thrive and to engage in the collaborative, creative work that awaits, childhood is the time to boost their natural wonder muscles for the long haul.

The Wonder Cycle

Finding ways to help the kids we love and teach become and remain more wonder prone can feel daunting. It gets easier, though, if we break wonder down into a few component parts. That is why I find Monica Parker's 5-part wonder cycle so helpful.

When we zoom in on each step of the cycle, it can be easier to spot and capitalize on every-day ways to use your classroom, home or other learning space to strengthen kids' wonder muscles.

Read on for techniques we can use with the kids we love and teach to support each part of the wonder cycle. Maybe you're already doing some—hurrah! For others, may they provide inspiration. Just by reading this, you're practicing curiosity and openness to new things!





What happens at this stage?

Being present. Being open to new experiences and new ways of seeing things. Being available to spot the novel and to see the day to day with fresh eyes.

Why is outdoors ideal for openness?

When you are outside, all senses are activated, and the landscape is alive, in motion and ever offering something to notice.

Techniques to support watching (openness)

- **Spend time outdoors**, where everything is always changing, both soothing and stimulating young minds at the same time.
- **Expose kids** to a wide range of cultures, perspectives and experiences through books, art, music, foods, artifacts, excursions and interactions with different types of people and living things. Check out our [Wonder Book List](#) for some of our favorite books.
- **Build quiet, open spaces into kids' schedules** just for noticing. It's great for cultivating openness and counterbalancing the impact of our wildly distracting world!
- **Cultivate calm** using mindfulness practices [like these breathing exercises](#) with kids.
- **Use various senses** to explore spaces and objects and to evaluate new experiences.
- Literally **adopt new perspectives** by using tools like magnifying glass or binoculars or by changing the position of your body.
- **Pretend** to be other creatures or characters from stories to boost kids' cognitive flexibility and readiness to accept new ideas and possibilities.
- Welcome with great interest objects and **experiences that are new or unusual**.
- Periodically slow down as you observe something familiar or experience a routine **as if it was the first time**. Narrate as you go.
- **Pick a tree and study it**. Notice what about it stays constant and notice or even capture in drawings or photographs what changes about it over time. Want ideas? Check out [this activity](#).
- **Make sure "Not Now" does not communicate "Not Ever."** So often, with fine intent, we stifle new ideas in order to keep kids focused on the task at hand. But, how can we tell kids "not now" without communicating, "not ever," diminishing kids' openness? Even when it is not the time, we can acknowledge new opportunities for wonder and even capture them for future reference.
- **Capture it!** Create a "Wonder Wall" in your classroom or "Wonder Book" in any space. Help kids to write, draw or dictate the things they notice and want to wonder about, and add them to the wall/book. Use your wonder wall/book to inform your teaching or caregiving. Use it with kids to inspire class/home projects or play themes. Share kids contributions with caregivers or other grown ups who support them.



Wander (curiosity)



What happens at this stage?

Giving space, time and trust to allow for questions and for curiosity to flourish.

Why is outdoors ideal for curiosity?

Natural environments are filled with things that are both familiar and exceptional —with amazing creatures and features that inspire us to ask why and how. They're also perfect places to experiment, to get our hands and whole bodies into the business of finding out and learning more.

Techniques to support wandering (curiosity)

- **Spend time outdoors**, where curiosity blossoms.
- **Use Inquiry.** As you notice things, ask questions. Then ask follow up questions. Welcome questions from kids, too. Never stop asking questions. Want some inspo? Check out [this quick 3-minute video](#).
- **Invite.** When you kick off a new lesson or activity, present it as an invitation to wonder about something vs. steps you are going to take. For example, “I wonder how we could describe how big that tree is to a faraway friend.” vs. “Today, we’re going to measure the tree.” Explore these ideas in [this 3-minute video](#).
- **Model.** As part of a class meeting or dinner time ritual, share something that you are wondering about or wanting to understand more. Welcome kids to do the same.
- **Promote Deep Learning.** Ask and explore questions that drive towards meaning making and deep learning. Why is something the way it is? How did something happen?
 - Learn more about deep learning vs. surface learning in [The Power of Wonder](#), Chapter 11.
- **Support.** Surround kids with ways to explore the questions that pique their interest. Gather related books and artifacts. Give kids tools to look more closely, measure or better sense objects of interest. Allow them direct experiences that allow them to investigate something that sparks curiosity. If kids are interested in animals, visit a farm or just sit on a blanket in the park.
- **Search and dwell.** When kids ask questions, help them to search for the answer and, if you can, dwell on the topic and ask a few more follow up questions.
- **Space.** Allow kids to play and explore things that make them curious in non-linear, imaginative ways, mindful that reality and fantasy blend for good reason in young minds.
- **Context.** Give a real life context and activate prior knowledge when you teach new ideas to activate kids’ genuine curiosity, inspire intrinsic motivation and inspire deep learning.
- **Hold space for competing ideas.** Showing kids how we can consider opposite ideas or feelings can help them stay both open and curious. For example, when you ask an open-ended question, leave time to consider all possible answers before you rush to one, “correct” answer.



“The most vital and significant factor (of learning)...is, without doubt, curiosity.”
—John Dewey

Whittle (absorption)



What happens at this stage?

Allowing space and time for kids to turn something over, to enter a state of absorption or flow as they go deep in pursuit of that which makes them curious.

Why is outdoors ideal for absorption?

Equal parts stimulating and calming, the great outdoors puts kids' bodies and brains in an ideal state for focus.



“Never interrupt a child deep in play—in that moment, they are doing just what they are meant to do.”
—Meghan Fitzgerald

Techniques to support whittling (absorption)

- **Give time.** Though time can feel like the most scarce resource in both teaching and parenting, kids need time to go deep, to turn something over and get fully immersed.
- **Hold back.** Remember that **participating in a conversation** is a huge cognitive lift for kids, especially for kids who are non-neurotypical. Look for signs that kids are ready to chat before you engage. Refrain, if you don't see those signs in order to support that immersion.
 - What are **common signs kids are open for conversation**?
 - Kids engage you in conversation first.
 - Kids gesture to you.
 - Kids look up or divert their attention towards you when you quietly enter their space.
- **Observe.** Channel your energy towards observing and providing the quiet kids need to really focus. Not only will you support their absorption, you will also notice things about a child's approach or interests that you can use to inform your teaching or caregiving.
- **Promote imaginative and pretend play.** From imaginary friends to fantasy worlds of forest fairies, childhood is the time for imaginative play. It turns out, the cognitive flexibility kids develop as they pretend helps them to delve deeper into a topic and stay absorbed, even when distractions pop up.
- **Support intuition** or a “6th sense” as a way of wondering. Sometimes, we just “have a feeling” about something, and following that sense can help us get and remain absorbed in wonder. As grown ups we can model this and/or allow kids to experience it.
- **Recognize super-attentenders.** Many kids who, in other contexts, are labeled “attention deficit” are actually able to hyper-attend, especially when they are able to pursue that which genuinely interests them. Notice and even celebrate this when you see it!
- **Meditate and be mindful.** Calming the mind aids in absorption. [Click here](#) to download six mindful breathing exercises that can help!

Wow & Whoa! (awe)



What happens at these stages?

To experience the surprise or cognitive dissonance of discovery and come out the other side with new understanding, heightened curiosity and even more wonder.

Why is outdoors ideal for awe?

The natural world is full of wonder bringers, and we are literally wired to experience elevated attention, mood and spirit when we behold them, especially when they bring us even closer to experiencing the incredibly, implausibly elegant design of our universe.



“The wonder of it all—the joy, the soaring spirits and reverential moments, the peace and feelings of belonging, of knowing that we are all part of a world that is pretty darn good.”

—Ed Bieber

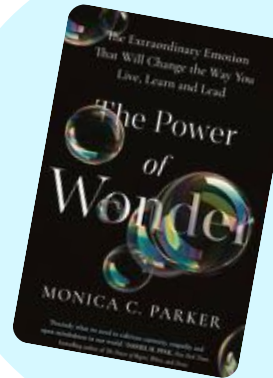
Techniques to support wow & whoa (awe)

- **All of the above!** Wow and Whoa are the payoff for supporting openness, curiosity and absorption. The more you adjust the learning environment and your approach to reinforce the first three parts of the wonder cycle, the more likely it is that kids will experience awe!
- **Bask in awe!** When you and/or the students you support arrive at new discoveries, celebrate those Aha moments! Slow down, set aside self-consciousness and just marvel, eyes-wide-jaws-dropped. Don't be afraid to remind kids and yourself that our world is truly AWESOME—and the moments when even a little bit of that incredible, wonderful design shows itself to us are to be treasured.
- **Capture discoveries.** Write down or have kids dictate new understandings. Take photos of kids' learning process or of the things that sparked wonder to you and them. Welcome kids to draw pictures of what they discover about the world.
- **Recall.** Don't just collect evidence of new discoveries, but go back again to recollect. Going back to look or listen to what kids have experienced actually helps them to reconjure the feelings and trigger the benefits again!
- **Share!** Share your findings with others in your learning community or personal networks to spread the wonder bug. We'd love to celebrate #Wonder with you, so tag #Tinkergarten!
- **Make connections.** Take time to notice how new discoveries connect to or remind you of things you've learned before. Circle back to connect your discoveries to the questions you asked at the start. Have a Wonder Book or Wonder Wall? Add photos/drawings/writing about kids' discoveries next to the things they wondered about initially to see the full wonder cycle in action!



Keep Learning

- Read all of Monica Parker's marvelous book, [The Power of Wonder: The Extraordinary Emotion That Will Change the Way You Live, Learn and Lead](#).
- Check out our Tinkergarten [Wonder Book List](#) to boost wonder in all ages.
- Read or listen to [What if Back to School Felt Like Back to Wonder?](#) on the blog.
- Get on the list to receive [free monthly calendars](#) filled with wonder-boosting, outdoor play activities for home or classroom.
- Join the [Wilder Child newsletter](#) or shop for printables or workshops.
- Spark wonder through outdoor play with a [Tinkergarten plan that fits you](#).



Get Inspired

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.”

—Rachel Carson, [The Sense of Wonder](#)

“I'm very concerned that our society is much more concerned with information than wonder, in information than silence... and I feel that we need a lot more wonder and a lot more silence in our lives.”

—Fred Rogers

“Wonder is a drive to explore, discover and understand. It is a joyous, even euphoric, activity that increases feelings of agency and self-efficacy while at the same time instilling a sense of well-earned humility.”

—Frank Kiel, [Wonder: Childhood and the Lifelong Love of Science](#)

“The most vital and significant factor (of learning)...is, without doubt, curiosity.

Eagerness for experience, for new and varied contacts, is found where wonder is found.” If the powers of curiosity “are not used and cultivated at the right moment, they tend to be transitory, to die out, or to wane in intensity, easily dulled and blunted.”

—John Dewey

“When someone's curiosity leads them to an answer, what they learn is encoded more deeply and thus retained longer, even moreso, when curiosity is intrinsically motivated.”

—Monica Parker, [The Power of Wonder](#)

“If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come.”

—Arapaho