When does a child begin learning social studies? When he or she first interacts with another person. By age 6, the young child has been involved in experiences related to all the basic concepts of the social studies. With guidance from an adult, he or she can successfully relate these experiences to each other. This process of finding relationships enables the child to arrange the information into an organized, meaningful whole. As the child experiences, relates, and arranges, he/she lives the social studies.

Physical exploration of the environment, such as jumping into rain puddles, is necessary for young children. Social interaction is also important. Children need to share in social experiences with other children and with people of all ages. As they have such experiences, they learn to see other points of view and they lose some of their self-centeredness. This allows them to understand more of the world and develops their thinking skills.

Social studies for young children can focus on two general areas: (1) building concepts, and (2) skills, values, and attitudes. Areas that can be included under “building concepts” are economics, other cultures, current topics, geography, and history. Skills can include sharing, communicating with others, locating and organizing information, and comparing and contrasting. Attitudes and values result from the ways we respond to something we have information about. They include valuing the dignity of each individual, understanding that each person has some responsibility to others, and allowing each person an opportunity to express his/her ideas and feelings. Many activities can be developed for young children in these two general areas of the social studies.

BY CYNTHIA S. SUNAL

The Social Studies: HOW TO BEGIN

Economics

One area that provides many experiences necessary to understanding life in our society is economics, which is concerned with how people balance the things they need with those they want and with what is available. Young children are familiar with this process, yet are not able to deal with the frustration that occurs when what is available does not satisfy what they want and/or need. By age 5, children have had some economic experiences and should be able to work with the following key concept areas:

1. the nature of wants and needs,
2. the meaning of consumers and producers,
3. the role of production.
4. the advantages of division of labor, and
5. the need for choice making.

Going shopping and to the bank present opportunities for economic education. On these occasions, the child sees money and services exchanged in a variety of ways. The barber shop, post office, roadside vegetable stand, newspaper carrier—all these are also places where they see such exchanges. Children should observe and participate in these exchanges and discuss them afterwards.

The child may also be given a small amount of money and be allowed to spend it as he/she chooses. The question, "What do I spend my nickel on?" can confuse and frustrate a child. Lots of experience, and adult questioning to clarify choices, can help. As the child decides, the adult may encourage him/her to ask, "How long will it last?", "How many ways can it be used?". "Is it something I really need or just want?", "If I spend my money on it, will I have anything left for other things?"

Other Cultures

International education is important to our society. First, because we are affected by what happens in other nations. Second, because other cultures show us different ways of solving problems and enjoying life.

The concept of diversity is basic to international education. Children may experience it and begin to understand it, if they are encouraged to try different ways of doing things. As adults provide opportunities for children to do things in their own way and to try new approaches, the concept of diversity will begin to form.

In her book Social Studies for the Preschool-Primary Child (Charles E. Merrill), Carol Seefeldt suggests that international education for young children include three key concept areas:

1. how people depend on each other,
2. the many cultures in our world and,
3. the similarities between people everywhere.

Working together on chores can show children that people do depend on other people. When the 4-year-old discovers that he can be helpful by emptying the wastebaskets, a beginning has been made. Setting the table together, and clearing up one’s toys, also reinforce this concept. The wastebasket emptier might be compared to the trash collector. The child can realize that this person holds a necessary and responsible job in the community.

The cultures of the world can become part of holiday celebrations. At Easter, the child can be shown a highly decorated Ukrainian Easter egg, or a Slovak Easter egg tree, or can help make English hot cross buns or Russian Easter breads. All these are fun and show the many pleasant ways in which people celebrate the same holiday.

Folk festivals may be found nearby. These usually include native and/or regional food, dancing, and costumes. An understanding of the variety of cultures as well as an enjoyment of and appreciation for them can result from participation. Ethnic foods, including soul food, moussaka, and enchiladas can please the stomach. Playing with toys from different parts of the world—small cars made in Britain or wooden dolls from Bavaria—is another way the child’s view of the world is enlarged.

Finding similarities between people can begin early. Folktales, poetry, and songs from other lands can be obtained from the local library and provide a good way to start. Children gradually find that people all over the world tell the same types of stories — only the characters and places have been changed. Africa’s “Ashanti the Spider” is a trickster who is a close cousin of the American South’s “Brer Rabbit.”

Current Topics

Current topics in the social sciences are plentiful, growing and changing with the times. Some of the areas that fall under this heading include:

1. political science,
2. environmental education,
3. career awareness, and
4. understanding the news.

Political science and environmental education are particularly good ex-