



# Introduction

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One summer evening at Conner Prairie Farm, a young girl danced freely in prairie grasses, inspired by beautiful symphonic music. She was with a church group attending *Symphony on the Prairie*. In the early 1980s, *Symphony on the Prairie* was a perfect description. This summer “concert hall” of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra was simply a prairie field at Conner Prairie Farm.

Conner Prairie Farm is one of those dreamed-of preschool field trip destinations, where children can be as active as they naturally are. This living history museum depicts early nineteenth century agrarian life near Indianapolis, Indiana. It is a place where many children return again and again with their teachers, families, neighbors, and friends.

Thus, the church bus was full to capacity with grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, children, neighbors, and friends for the Conner Prairie Farm trip to enjoy a picnic supper, symphony concert, and, of course, the sunset as night fell on the prairie. We were a group of about thirty folks, ranging in age from eighty-something to babes in arms. The children were repeat visitors to Conner Prairie Farm, although this was their first symphony concert. In my mind, it was the perfect setting to attend an inaugural concert—a familiar place that holds pleasant memories, the fresh air of a warm summer evening, the company of family and friends of all ages and races, and picnic food.

We set out our lawn chairs, big and small. We spread patchwork quilts and frayed blankets over the fresh-cut, stubby field grass. Out came the good supper picnic fare. As we ate, we watched a large semicircle of musicians form. We listened as they tuned their instruments for the evening concert. This was before the building of the concert stage and shell, before stage lighting (other than that of twilight skies), and before the installation of sophisticated sound equipment at Conner Prairie Farm.

Back then, musicians seated themselves in chairs set on an open, grassy field under blue sky. The music from brass, strings, woodwinds, and percussion mixed with the sounds of nature. Children are nature’s listeners, attuned to the sounds of the wind rustling tall prairie grasses, to chirping birds in the distance, and to the deep sounds of crickets. Thus, the sounds of a symphony were simply more music to their ears. I remember puzzling with several children as to whether we heard a meadowlark in the distance or if a clever flutist was at work.

As the music played on and the sun began to set, we became enchanted by a child. On a lovely warm summer night in the enjoyable company of family and friends, delighted by the rich sound of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony no. 4*, this very young girl spontaneously rose to dance. The setting sun was her backdrop and a grassy knoll was her stage. She stretched out her arms and lifted her legs. She moved naturally and playfully through tall grasses, responding to the rhythm of the music. When the musician’s score cued *legato*, this child gently moved, making smooth, flowing curves through the

A myriad of memories come to mind from field trips to Conner Prairie Farm:

- I remember the time when a small group of four-year-olds ran into an old barn to talk to the man and woman who were busily repairing the huge barn door. The children's fervent questioning brought forth information about cows, horses, tractors, and the laundering of coveralls in a stream!
- I will never forget the courage it took a very shy child to reach out with a penny in order to purchase candy from a kind, patient docent in the general store.
- Once, all of the children seemed fascinated with the shearing of sheep, as well as the spinning of wool, and natural dyes coloring yarn. According to one child, "Grandma can use this to knit pretty scarves and mittens for our wintertime." The subsequent discussions about the safety of animals and kind ways to shear sheep were remarkable.
- Laughingly, I recall the kindergarten child who extemporaneously dramatized the role of a teacher in the old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse. She wrote on an old, dusty blackboard with broken pieces of white chalk and instructed giggling children who playfully copied numerals and letters of the alphabet on antique slates. One of the children asked, "Is this really how Grandpa John had school in the olden days?"

air. *Adagio* sent her leisurely dancing down the knoll, momentarily disappearing, until she made a gradual ascent with the crescendo.

One by one, the people in our group followed her every move. To us, it seemed miraculous when a butterfly joined her to dance. At first, the butterfly followed her. Then, the girl followed the butterfly, moving her arms up and down in the breeze. For a while they danced side by side. This child, completely engrossed in the music, seemed unaware of her audience. It was as if this were the most natural thing in the world to playfully move to beautiful music under wide, open skies—with or without the close company of winged creatures. Our entire group was silent, captivated by the spirit of this occasion. We could imagine no better celebration of earth, sky, music, friendship, and life.

Ideally, all children's celebrations, as well as the blessings given to and by children, reflect an element of consonance. For musicians, consonance is the sounding of tones that produce a feeling of rest, as though there is no need for further resolution. The child at dance was absorbed and she absorbed us. This was not contrived or practiced. Her dance evolved from meaningful experience. Preschool children celebrate well when grounded in meaningful experiences and freed to be themselves.

## *Ideas for Discussion and Action*

### *Directors, Teachers, Parents and Guardians Meaningful Experiences at Child-Friendly Places*

This story challenges us to ground children's celebrations in meaningful experiences. Children were taken for their first symphony orchestra concert with family and friends to a familiar place—a child-friendly environment. Name the child-friendly qualities offered by this setting.

### *The Influence of Experience*

In what ways do you think this experience influenced the children's appreciation for music?

### *Memorable Experiences*

The children had good memories from previous field trips to Conner Prairie Farm. Identify memorable experiences for children at your preschool. Be specific in listing them and their meaning to children.

### *Making More Meaning by Reliving and Sharing Memories*

List the ways that children truly enjoy reliving these experiences. For example, do they replay them in dramatic play? Do they sing about them? Do these experiences provide subject matter for discussions, stories, drawings, or paintings? Are there photo displays or albums to which the children return, in order to reminisce about and gather more meaning from the experience?

Ideally, if you were to share the preschool's memorable experiences with children's families, friends, and members of their faith community, would you present photographs, drawings, and stories? In what ways would the children, themselves, be included—ways that are appropriate for the children's stages of development?

### *Honoring Individual Personalities*

If the children are included, what are the ways that you can honor children's individual temperaments? For example, some adults do not have the temperament or desire to stand in front of a crowd, so they decline to speak in public. It stands to reason, then, that all children may not wish to "say a piece" or present publicly at a program. When this is the case, how can you include these children in meaningful ways?

## *Congregational Leaders*

### *A Harmonious Experience*

This story is about a captivating experience during a group trip to an outdoor concert by a symphony orchestra. Review and reflect on the final three paragraphs of the story.

### *Analysis of a Selected Children's Program*

Select a typical or recent children's program presented in your faith community and identify meaningful experiences for the children and families associated with this program. For example, did their program take place in a familiar place where children have had valued experiences? Were the children provided the freedom to express themselves and their ideas? Did they share accumulated knowledge in a sound way, from the perspective of human growth and development?

### *Children on Stage*

Was the children's program that you are discussing designed to be meaningful for children or was it designed to put children on stage simply for the benefit of adults? How can you reinvent children's programs to do more of the former and less of the latter?

### *Tapping Experts in Your Faith Community*

List the people in your faith community who have expertise in child development, early childhood education, and family relations, on whom you can call to consult as you plan special children's programs. Identify the ways (e.g., a planning meeting, special discussion forum, written feedback) you can involve them while planning these programs.

Initially, ask these people to join you for analysis of a recent or typical children's program. Evaluate the ways that it affected each domain of children's growth and development—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, and physical. Alongside your list for each domain, identify ways to enhance the positive effects on children's development.