

MAKE YOUR OWN DREAM CATCHER:

A CRAFTS PROJECT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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ANNELISE, AGE 4



MAYA, AGE 5



JOSEPHINE, AGE 5

One of the very best things we can do to honor our own dreams is to promote dream education among children. This past fall I tried an approach to dream education with a class of preschool children that seemed to work pretty well, and I wanted to share what I did with others who have the opportunity to work, and play, with young children.

The children at this particular preschool ranged in ages from three to five (my daughter Maya is one of the five-year-olds). None of them could read yet, and the three-year-olds were only just beginning to learn how to make representational drawings. All of the children, however, were avid and competent crafts makers. They loved anything that involved cutting, glueing, coloring, stapling, and decorating.

Something else all the children shared was a vivid awareness of their nightmares. Most of the children couldn't offer long narratives of their dreams; when asked to describe one they would say something very brief like, "I had a scary dream of skeletons." But behind these short descriptions lay imaginative experiences that were very powerful and deeply frightening. Every child to whom I spoke knew what a nightmare was, and every child was eager to listen to ideas about how to deal with the threat of bad dreams.

Drawing on their love of crafts and their keen awareness of nightmares, I tried to provide the children with an art project that could help them feel more confident in facing their scary dreams. When the children sat down at the arts and crafts table I asked them if they knew what a Native American dream catcher was. Some of the older children knew, but most of the children didn't. I told them a brief story about how the parents in some Native American tribes make special ornaments to hang over their children's beds at night to guard them from nightmares. The ornaments have a kind of web or netting in the middle, and pretty decorations all around; the idea is that the good dreams will be attracted by the colorful beads and feathers and will come through to the sleeping child, while the bad dreams will get caught in the protective net and evaporate in the morning sunlight.

Then I showed the children the various crafts materials arranged on the table, and described how they could make their own dream catchers. Maya made hers first, and we showed it to each child as an example when they started making their own. For the outer hoop part of the dream catcher we used colored pipe cleaners, which the children were able to twist into a ring shape a couple of inches in diameter. For the inner netting I had cut out little circles of nylon window screen (not a very traditional material, I admit!) which the children took and fastened to the hoop with a stapler. Then they took a little string with a knot at one end, strung a few colored beads and shells on it, and tied the other end to the hoop so it would hang down. After picking out a feather or two and taping it to the edge of the dream catcher, they were done. The pictures above show the finished creations, and their proud makers.

With older children a more sophisticated set of materials and procedures could be used. In particular, the weaving of the interior netting could be made into a very intricate and engaging crafts activity. The children at my daughter's preschool did not yet have the fine motor skills to do such weaving, however, and I know from painful experience how disastrous it is to give young children a crafts project that far exceeds their current skill level.

Since we made the dream catchers I've had several of the children's parents come up to me and describe wonderful conversations their children initiated with them about dreams, dreaming, and what people can do about nightmares; I in turn told the parents about some of the intriguing and insightful comments their children made at the arts and crafts table while they were making their dream catchers. Young children know from their own experience how powerful dreams and nightmares can be. Perhaps this means that the true focus of dream education should not be on children, but rather on adults – with the goal of teaching parents to pay more attention to the creative powers that spontaneously emerge from their children's dreaming imaginations.