

INTRODUCTION

What we hope you will be dealing with in “Nifty Fifty” is the “Aha!” factor—that wonderful sense of intellectual excitement we experience when ideas snap into focus or when something occurs to us for the first time.

“Nifty Fifty” attempts to bring this “Aha!” factor into play by asking fundamental, provocative questions about fifty very ordinary things - things as plain as apples, cookies, bowls and birds. (No aardvarks or abacuses here) Why such simplicity? Because children, like adults, care most about things that touch their lives in some direct, meaningful way. As a result, there are many more motivational possibilities—and, therefore, more “Aha!” possibilities—in everyday things than there are in exotic things. “Nifty Fifty’s” premise is as simple (and as profound) as that.

Those of you who know our DISCOVER! card set series will not be surprised by the everyday nature of our subjects. However, there is one fundamental difference between DISCOVER! and “Nifty Fifty.” While DISCOVER! is hands-on, using the actual object as the starting point for the activities, which are often observational in nature, “Nifty Fifty” inquiries are almost totally conceptual. In other words, the purpose here is not to ask a child about one particular sock, but rather (with apologies to Plato) about “sock-ness.”

You can probably make best use of “Nifty Fifty” in your classroom by presenting the questions orally, handling one subject area at a time. Let children discuss each question as fully as they can, and by all means, encourage any creative meandering that takes place as they attempt to formulate their answers.

While we’re on the subject of answers, it should be noted that we have not attempted to give you all of the possible responses, but rather to provide the best (and most succinct) answer that has occurred to us. If one of your bright students comes up with something we have not anticipated, we say ... “Bravo!” Or, rather ... “Aha!” You may well find that other “spin-off” possibilities will occur to you as you and your students toss ideas around. If so ... “Aha!” again.

Finally, we hope this book will make a small contribution toward the goal of helping children improve their thinking abilities. We hope it will sensitize, sharpen, and make them more aware. We hope it will provide some insights into the process of critical and creative thinking. To this end, we have done our best to make certain that the questions can be answered without relying too heavily on prior knowledge. Obviously, this is not totally possible, but at least we have tried.

For all its apparent simplicity, “Nifty Fifty” has given us here at Tin Man Press a real intellectual workout, if for no other reason than the fact that when you are talking to a child about sticks, grass or pets, your thinking had better be on the mark! We hope you and your students will have as much fun with this book as we have had.