



Connecting Children and Nature: Practical Tips for Parents & Other Caregivers

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Infants

- Move naptime outdoors, letting baby sleep in a carriage, pack 'n play, or on a blanket spread out on the grass
- Make daily stroller rides part of your routine
- When baby is fussy, hold him/her in your arms and walk around under the trees, allowing yourself to relax (and your baby too)
- Do “floor-play” on a blanket outside or, for older infants, let them crawl in the grass
- Take older infants outside to touch and feel interesting things: the rough bark of a tree, textures of different leaves, pinecones, stones
- Introduce your baby to rain, holding baby in your arms or a carrier, with an umbrella keeping you both dry

Toddlers

- After lunch, enjoy quiet reading time outside with your toddler
- Go for daily nature walks, letting your toddler’s curiosity lead the way
- Take a basket along on your walk and let your toddler collect interesting objects to take home and display on a special shelf
- Make it a daily ritual to say good morning and good night to the plants, animals, sun and stars, creating a sense of place and connection to nature for both you and your child
- Buy a colorful rain jacket, boots and umbrella for your toddler, turning rainy days into special days for walks and puddle-splashing
- Create a small area in your yard where your toddler can dig in the dirt, make mud pies, or create sculptures from twigs and rocks
- Use blankets and chairs, a bench, or a sawhorse to make a pretend tent. Toddlers love to get under things to play peek-a-boo or to create imaginary adventures.
- In winter, go sledding, make snowmen, or just romp in the snow

Preschoolers

- Continue the toddler activities, but allow your child more freedom to explore independently while you watch from the sidelines
- On nature walks, be more intentional about things your child gathers, arranging them into a mini-museum at home, looking them up in books or on the internet, and labeling them appropriately
- Play an outdoor matching game by taking along pictures of bugs, leaves, or plants and seeing if your child can find the real thing to match the picture.
- Take a digital camera along and let your child take pictures of interesting things. Notice – and photograph – the seasonal changes of a favorite tree or plant.

- Take a walk after dark and see if you can spot any nocturnal animals (bats or raccoons, for example). Notice the different phases of the moon and introduce your child to the stars and constellations.
- Cut the center from the lid of a large ice cream container and lay it on the ground. Ask your child to see how many living things are inside that circle.
- Have your child plant a garden with you, even if it's just a container garden with herbs. Let your child care for the plants, with your help, and watch how they change from day to day. When the plants are fully grown, use them in a meal you make together, allowing your child the "seed to feed" experience. (Many picky eaters will try new things when they've grown them themselves.)
- Visit the farmer's market and pick out new things to taste at home.
- Get acquainted with one of the farmers and see if you can arrange a visit to the farm so your preschooler can see where the fruits and vegetables are grown and learn how a farm operates.
- Visit local nature centers, which usually have special places and activities geared to this age group (as well as to older ages)
- Go tent camping at a nearby state or county park or even just in your own backyard. Leave the electronics inside and encourage your child to listen to nature's night sounds. Buy a child-size LED headlamp, which helps your child feel like a real explorer. (One with a red light is better for the eyes of nocturnal animals.)
- Keep folding camp chairs in the trunk of your car and, in the midst of running errands, stop at some pretty spot and take a short nature break, a great way for everyone to soak up the calm of the natural world.

Elementary Age

- Continue the activities above, but encourage your child to do many of these things independently with friends, telling you about their experiences when they come home. (Form a supportive network with the parents of your child's friends, setting some common ground rules and expectations, so the children can experience increasing autonomy within safe limits.)
- Engage kids in organizing a nature scavenger hunt, then divide into teams and see which team can find the largest number of items within an hour. (These can be small things they can bring back with them. Or, alternatively, each team could take a digital camera and snap a shot of each item on the list.)
- Take photos of different types of clouds over a period of several days, then match the photos to pictures and descriptions in a library book or on the internet, learning what the different types of clouds indicate in terms of weather.
- Encourage your child to keep a weather journal, noting daily high and low temperatures, measuring rainfall or snowfall over the course of a month. Calculate average temperature for the month and total precipitation, and then compare that to published information on what's typical for that time of year.
- Set up side-by-side easels by the lake or some other scenic spot and draw or paint what you see. Do this with a group of neighborhood kids and have a backyard art exhibit with refreshments at the end of the day.
- Enroll your child in one of the many outdoor camps our state offers (overnight or daycamp, depending on your child's age and comfort level). Engage your child in making the decision about which camp to attend and for how long.
- Have your child choose nature-oriented classes or activities through the Park and Rec system, YMCAs, or other similar organizations in your community. Consider sailing classes on city lakes for older elementary kids.

Adolescents

- Being sensitive to your maturing child's interests and level of independence, continue some of the above activities as appropriate
- Service activities contribute in important ways to healthy development of adolescents. Support your teen in finding volunteer opportunities, such as cleaning up the environment, participating in data collection (such as the bird "census") or mentoring younger children in nature activities at community programs.
- If your teen is looking for paid summer work, encourage him or her to look for outdoor work, camp counseling, or jobs at nature-oriented companies or organizations.

Whole Family

- Declare a family "green hour" (or even half hour) each day, when everyone unplugs and does something outside (walking, sitting and reading, gardening, playing)
- Make walks, bike rides, picnics, sledding adventures, etc. part of your regular family routine. If your kids see you enjoying the outdoors, they'll be more likely to enjoy it too.
- Once a month, plan a special adventure beyond your usual activities. For example, go to a state or county park and take a vigorous hike (with babies or very young children in a backpack); rent canoes, rowboats, or paddleboats and enjoy the waters of the city lakes; or go to a city park that rents snowshoes or cross country skis for the whole family.
- Engage other families on your block to declare one day a week (or even one day a month) "unplugged day" when everyone disconnects from electronics and goes outside
- Take on a family volunteer project, such as adopting a stretch of highway that you keep clean all year round (maybe with other families from your neighborhood)
- Be advocates, encouraging your school, community, and/or state to make natural spaces accessible to all children and families.
- Set up a special piggybank in which each family member places a regular contribution, donating the money to a program that provides outdoor experience for children who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity.