

## Explore Nature with Your Preschooler

When you were a young child, do you remember having some special experiences outdoors? It might have been finding a tiny tree toad, examining snowflakes on your mitten, wondering about a rainbow, discovering a fragrant, sticky, perfect pine cone, gathering colorful fall leaves and pressing them in a book or looking for four-leaf clovers. Is your preschooler having moments of wonder in nature?

In “Last Child in the Woods,” Richard Louv (2005) used the term nature deficit disorder to describe the human cost of alienation from nature. According to Louv, children’s outdoor activities are often organized sports, “lacking spontaneity and positive connection to the natural world.” He brought national media attention to concerns long voiced by environmental educators, conservationists, and other veteran advocates. Raising children with less time in nature, he believes, threatens their independent judgment, value of place, ability to feel awe and wonder, sense of stewardship for the earth, and immediately their psychological and physical health. Studies at the University of Illinois show that time in natural settings significantly reduces symptoms of attention-deficit disorder in children as young as age five. The research also demonstrated a reduction in negative stress.

### So What Is a Parent To Do?

Start slowly, with even ten or fifteen minutes a day of unstructured play outside. Build up to one hour per day. Then plan a periodic nature adventure where the whole family can be surrounded by green. Joseph Cornell, author of

“Sharing Nature with Children” and founder of the Sharing Nature Foundation ([www.sharingnature.com](http://www.sharingnature.com)) suggests finding a place that’s exciting, where there are things to see – an autumn forest or a pond filled with aquatic insects.

“Discovering Nature with Young Children” (Chalufour & Worth, 2003) encourages parents to consider adopting the naturalist role as a family. Naturalists study living things, especially by direct observation of animals and plants.

A naturalist:

- Has a serious respect for living things and their habitats
- Asks questions and observe over time

Maintain a positive attitude. Resist the temptation to squash a bug or show your fear, as your child will follow your lead.

Here are some helpful phrases for naturalist talks with your child:

- Tell me about the plant you found.*
- I wonder what would happen...*
- Take some time to think.*
- I don't know; we probably need to ask more questions.*



## Walk on the Wild Side

Take your little explorer on a short stroll with a theme. Here are some examples:

- **Listen while you walk** – Loud? Soft? What is making that sound? Can you hear the wind?
- **Weather watch** – Walk during a sprinkle or enjoy the puddles afterward. Notice clouds.
- **Animal alert** – Nests, animal tracks, droppings and tree holes spark conversations.

**BEST TIP:** Don't worry about being an expert. Be a fellow explorer and find answers together.

## Mystery of the Disappearing Ant



The natural world is full of mysteries that parents and kids can try and solve together. Framing an investigation as a mystery doubles the fun. A very doable favorite activity is setting out different types of food for ants. Ask your child to predict which food will be the ants' favorite. Make a chart to track progress and draw conclusions about preferred foods. *Hollyhocks and Honeybees* by Starbuck, Olthof, and Midden (2002) has a detailed description of this activity called "Calling All Ants!"

## Color My World

Go on a Color Hunt: Bring along paint chips from a hardware store. Let your child find the same color in nature. If possible, collect objects in nature that match the paint chips. You can use magnifying glasses to later examine the objects.



Prepared by: Susan E. Nagelkerk, Family Living Educator, Sauk County UW Cooperative Extension  
Editor: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Reviewer: Dave Riley, Extension Specialist, Child Development and Early Education, UW-Madison  
Layout: Penny Otte, Office Operations Associate, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

## Dandelion Party

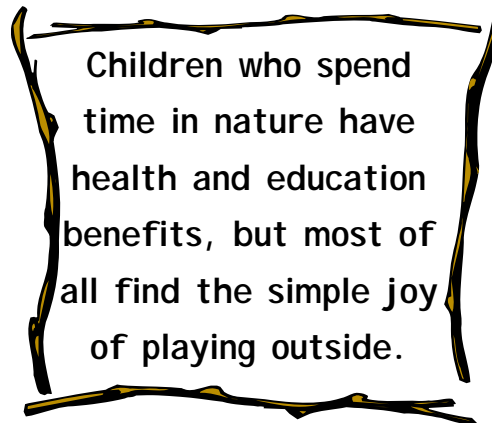
Grandparents may remember playing with dandelions when they were young. Long chains for crowns and necklaces were constructed with each link formed by putting the narrow end of the stem into the somewhat wider part at the base. Children also held a blossom under each other's chin and asked, "Do you like butter?" If they could see a yellow reflection the answer was, "Yes." Children enjoy blowing the seeds from the puffy seed head and often invent games such as trying to be the first to blow off all the seeds from their plant or pretending to determine what time it is by how many seeds are left.

Talk about how nature reseeds itself when the wind blows.

## Bird Song

Lie on your back. Listen to the birds. How many different kinds can you hear? What do you think they are saying to each other?

Consider getting a bird song CD from the library.



### References:

- Bailie, P. (2010). *One hour field trip to a nature preschool*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Chalouf, I., & Worth, K. (2003). *Discovering nature with young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Louv, R. (2007). *Leave no child inside*. New York, NY: Orion.
- Townsend, J. (2010, Summer). *Just think outside*. Wisconsin Early Childhood Association.

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin, Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu  
May 2011