

Kids and Nature

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Stomping in mud puddles, digging in piles of dirt, swinging on a tire swing, catching fireflies, picking vegetable from the garden—these are all ways kids and nature go hand-in-hand. The outdoors provides an exciting place for kids to play, explore, observe, discover and be challenged. Yet, in today's modern world, kids are increasingly disconnected from nature.

I recently asked a seven-year-old boy what he liked about nature. He replied, "I don't know, there isn't any nature nearby." Kids believe that nature can only be found in a state park or vacation spot, and not in their backyards and community green spaces.

In the past, kids spent hours playing in their yard or running around the neighborhood. Today, kids spend a lot of their time indoors using a variety of modern technologies. Technology is useful but it's no substitute for the natural world. The best way for kids to understand their place in the environment is to get out and enjoy it!

There are many ways to engage kids in nature. First of all, do it yourself! Kids who see adults engaging in nature and enjoying outside activities are more likely to participate too. Ideas for family play:

1. Backyard campout—With the bugs and the summer heat gone, this is a great time a year to pitch a tent in the yard. Kids can listen for night sounds and guess what animals are active at night.
2. Picnic—Kids love to eat outside! Throw a blanket on the grass and enjoy a meal together. Talk about what other animals eat and where they might "picnic."
3. Campfire—Cool fall evenings are best spent around a campfire. Roast marshmallows, sing songs, tell stories and look at the night sky.
4. Dig in the dirt—Plant colorful mums or a tree in the yard. Dig out the vegetable garden and prepare the area for next season. Use leftover vegetables to start a compost pile.
5. Nature Hike—Walk around the yard or neighborhood a few times a week to notice new things. Look for different fall colors, squirrels gathering acorns and what birds are still in the area.
6. Scavenger hunt—Kids love searching for things! Make lists with words or pictures and see how many different things kids can find in their yard. Kids will discover diversity in their own backyard.
7. Feed the birds—The fall and winter season is a great time to start feeding birds. Collect pine cones, cover them with peanut butter, and roll them in birdseed. Hang them up in trees in the yard and watch our feathery friends find a treat!
8. Visit an apple orchard or pumpkin farm—Talk with kids about harvest time. Kids can help bake treats using apples or pumpkins. Pumpkins can be used for decorations and then added to the compost pile after Halloween.
9. Rake leaves—Kids will have fun and get lots of exercise raking the leaves. After the leaves are in big piles, let the kids jump in. Talk about why leaves are so important to a tree and why trees lose them in the fall.
10. Nature journal—Kids like to express themselves with pictures and words. Provide them with some paper and have them find a quiet place in the yard. Kids can record what they hear, see, smell and experience in their journals.



Jennifer Swerczek, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

