



Ideas for Outdoor Play

plantnebraska.org

“One of the most important gifts a parent can give a child is his or her own infectious enthusiasm for the outdoors.” – Richard Louv

The research is in and it's clear: contact with nature improves concentration, productivity and cognitive development; relieves symptoms of attention deficit disorder; feeds imagination and encourages a "sense of wonder;" buffers stress; encourages activity; offsets obesity; promotes social interaction; appeals to a wide range of personality types, ages and learning styles; and improves brain structure, chemistry and function.

Still, for most parents the strongest argument is their own memory of time spent outdoors as a child. One way to encourage that is to give some thought to your backyard or to areas that might offer good play spaces. PlantNebraska leaving some “rough edges” where kids can be creative and leave things in place to continue another day. Even a 2-3 foot area is suitable for younger kids, possibly near a swing or sandpile. Trees, shrubs and tall grasses can help create forts or “hiding places.” Providing a variety of plants with interesting textures, shapes, seedheads, flowers and colors encourages outdoor exploration, and it'll draw birds, butterflies and insects for even more interest. Below are some ideas and resources to help get the family outdoors.

Things to Provide

- Soil, sand, gravel and water for digging and making sand castles, pathways and mud pies
- Loose parts—sticks, wood, seeds, shells and rocks
- Guide books
- A variety of plants with interesting textures, colors and smells and ones that attract butterflies, bees, birds and insects
- Magnifying glass, microscope and kids' binoculars (magnification of 6x or less for close range)
- Birdfeeders and bird baths

Things to do

- Nature Scavenger Hunt –Kids love to collect things in different colors, textures, shapes and smells. Have younger children find something purple. For older children, make it more complex: “Go find me something yellow that is rough and rectangular.” Or play “I spy” and have them look for a green and yellow spider.
- Increase habitat by providing bird baths and feeders and keeping track of the birds you see.
- Build a fort or lean-to with old sheets, branches and wood 4. Do leaf and bark rubbings or use them for other art





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projects. Pay attention to the different colors and shapes of the leaves in your neighborhood as they start changing color, and try to ID them.

- Look for spiders, butterflies, bird nests, ant trails and animal tracks.
- Start collections of rocks, seeds, insects.
- Take a walk, climb a tree, go fishing, fly a kite, watch the sunrise or sunset.
- Take a picnic in your own backyard, or set up a tent for camping.
- Whittle, with a butter knife for young kids
- Jump in the leaves.
- Play hopscotch or other sidewalk games, or make your own stepping paths with bricks, stones or sticks.
- Grow plants from seed or transplant something you've found.
- Turn on the hose and play in the water, make a mud pie or sand castle.
- Put peanut butter on a cone or honey on the bark of a tree and see who comes to visit.
- Turn over rocks or bricks to see what's hiding.
- Keep a journal or sketch book * Older kids can be encouraged to follow their interests—GPS technology for scavenger hunts; bird watching with binoculars and an ID guide; catching bugs; building lean-tos, stone walls or pathways; keeping an outdoor journal or sketchbook.



Books

For all ages: Guidebooks to insects, plants, rocks, weather and birds

Recommendations from Lincoln City Libraries:

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder, Richard Louv

Backyards for Kids, Ziba Kashef

Follow the Trail: A Young Person's Guide to the Great Outdoors, Jessica Loy

Go Outside! : Over 130 Activities for Outdoor Adventures, Nancy Blakey

Kids' Places to Play, Jeanne Huber

The Adventurous Book of Outdoor Games: Classic Fun for Daring Boys and Girls, Scott Strother

The Dangerous Book for Boys, Conn Iggulden

The Daring Book for Girls, Andrea Buchanan

The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children, David Elkind

Unplugged Play: No Batteries. No Plugs. Pure Fun, Bobbi Conner
Winter Day Play! Activities, Crafts, and Games for Indoors and Out, Nancy Castaldo

More planting, landscaping and nature resources available at plantnebraska.org.

