

Understanding Nature for Children

What Nature Exploring Can Do for Your Child

Children are natural explorers. They have the true explorer's interest in their immediate surroundings as well as in faraway places, and they are eager to know why things are as they are. If you are a wise parent, you will look upon these qualities in your child as a sacred fire, always to be fed, allowed to die out, never. An inquiring mind and zest for living are essential for a rich, interesting, and worth-while life. Childhood is the time to nourish and strengthen these fine qualities.

Just as your child is a natural explorer, you are a natural guide. You help him find security and a sense of direction in the broad and bewildering world that men have made; so, too, you can guide him along nature's ways-and give him a happy outlet and satisfaction for his natural curiosity and exuberance.

You can be a fellow explorer, too, enriching your own life as well as your child's. As you look back on your own early years, you may recall the first time you noticed a bud opening into a flower, a bird building its nest, two colonies of ants battling each other. You may remember that such intimate glimpses of nature gave you a real thrill. Now, as a parent, you can find still more pleasure in learning about the ways of animals and the wonders of plants as you share your observing with your child. No need to go on a safari through Central Africa-delightful discoveries await you in your own back yard, in city parks and suburban gardens, along forest trails where you may hike, and by the side of lakes and streams or the ocean where you may vacation.

There is no end to the wealth of experiences nature holds in store for you and your child. In a park you can see squirrels burying nuts, providing for lean times in a season of plenty. You may observe a flock of wild ducks landing on a park lake for a stopover in their long fight from summer to winter homes. Bees, butterflies, and ants have strange and wonderful ways that you and your child can watch with fascination for hours.

The diversion nature offers you is more exciting than any invented by man, yet it is close at hand and costs you nothing. In many suburbs you may look out of the window in the morning and see a woodchuck nibbling its breakfast in a dewy field, or a rabbit scampering across the lawn, purposefully headed for the vegetable garden. You may watch spiders spinning silken traps, or see an exciting tug-of-war between a robin and an earthworm. In woodlands and meadows, in zoos and museums, there is even more for you to observe.

The Best Approach To Exploring Nature

What is the best method of exploring nature? The answer depends on the individual child, for children vary in their approach to nature's activities just as they differ in countless other ways. One child is full of curiosity about plant and animal life from the time he is an infant. Another is absorbed in fanciful ideas, while still another has a mechanical bent, remaining oblivious of natural wonders until you bring them to his attention.

And so exploring nature is not always a simple matter: It is not just "knowing all the answers" or pointing out each tree or bird that you see. A background of information is invaluable, to be sure, but you must pass it on in such a way that you do not

overwhelm the child's own modest discoveries. Awareness is essential, but it should not be carried to a point where your child considers you slightly eccentric. On the whole, the successful approach lies in encouraging his inquisitiveness and providing opportunities for him to satisfy his curiosity.

We Learn from Nature

Children with a practical turn of mind particularly enjoy hearing about ways in which man has put nature's "inventions" to use. Outstanding among these devices is camouflage, applied so effectively by many birds and other animals for their own protection. This principle pointed the way for the change from army uniforms that made soldiers conspicuous targets to the deceptive, neutral earth and leaf tones used in battle nowadays.

Another debt we owe nature is the inspiration of bird flight, which has been carefully studied in advancing our own conquest of the air. Fish that swam in prehistoric seas, and many other creatures, have benefited from streamlining-another principle that we have put to use only recently. Wasps were adept at making paper from wood fiber centuries before human beings learned the technique. Our recent invention of radar is an old story to bats, which have a somewhat comparable system for getting their bearings as they fly sightless through treacherous passageways. These are just a few of the lessons that the practical-minded child-or any child-will enjoy having pointed out to him as he becomes acquainted with nature's ways.

Overcoming Fear

Exploring nature teaches children to overcome many baseless fears. Occasionally you find a boy or girl showing more timidity than enjoyment in encounters with animals. The reason for this may be difficult to trace, for a child sometimes has experiences of which his parents are not aware. I saw a case in point one day in a woody stretch of a large city park where children were playing unsupervised. A big boy, hand outstretched, started to chase a little fellow, and was fairly hissing with menace:

"Spider! Spider!"

The smaller child was screaming in fright. My curiosity aroused as to the size of the creature inspiring his terror, I approached the older boy and asked if I might see the spider. He gave me a delighted conspiratorial smile and showed me what was in his hand: a small flower!

"I just wanted to scare him," he explained. "He didn't come close enough to see what I really had."

Meanwhile something remarkable had happened. The younger boy had not only stopped crying, but was coming slowly toward us. My interest in the "spider" had aroused his curiosity and was giving him courage to at least see what the "dangerous" creature looked like. It was strong evidence of the influence of older people on a youngster-to his advantage or detriment.

As we spend time with children out-of-doors, we become familiar with the fears they may have of little-known creatures. Once we realize that these fears exist, it is usually not difficult to set at rest any timidity that is really baseless. The remedy is simply to give the youngster an understanding of the dreaded animal.

"The Child Is Father of the Man"

We contribute a great deal to a child's future happiness by giving him a sympathetic acquaintance with as much wildlife as possible. The point is brought home to us when we meet an adult who is agitated by any number of groundless fears.

I remember, for example, a visit to our woodland cabin by a woman whose usual haunts were in New York. All day long she had been enjoying the trees and flowers, the river, and glimpses of bird life; but in the evening a screech owl's tremulous wailing whistle suddenly shattered the quiet. All our explanations about its being "only an owl" proved futile. Our visitor had been quite unnerved by the unearthly sound, and it was obvious she could hardly wait to return to what to her was the calming environment of the big city.

A few evenings later another visitor-this time a little boy of no more than five-heard the wail of the screech owl. "What was that?" he asked.

We told him, hastily thinking of interesting facts that might dispel his fears. But we need not have bothered. As soon as he heard it was an owl, he said wistfully:

"I wish he would come close so I could hold him and pat him."

It is pleasant to think how rich life will be for this child, growing up with an acceptance of all the sounds and sights that have a rightful place in nature's scheme. But he did not come by this attitude through chance. His parents have been giving him a knowledge and understanding of wildlife since he was three. They have told him nature stories and taught him nature lore and hobbies that have widened his world and made it more enjoyable. All this will certainly contribute to a healthful serenity in later years.

You will find it easy and delightful to do the same for your child or children. You are building for the future when you instil in your child a true appreciation of nature and outdoor activities.

No one who has this heritage is likely to become a neurotic adult. His conception of the universe and our own earth and the life on it, including himself, is on too grand a scale to permit petty man-made problems to shatter his nerves.

Famous People As Nature Lovers

It is true that some children show a deep interest in flowers and birds and beasts without any special encouragement from adults; but if they can share their interest with their parents, the whole experience becomes more vital and the bonds of family affection are strengthened. Many leading citizens, who are not only famous but have also been successful in their personal lives, have happy childhood memories of nature exploring with their parents.

Theodore Roosevelt's closely knit family had a wealth of such shared interests, and when he was President of the United States his letters to his children away at school were filled with nature news. When spring came to Washington, he reported that "not only are the song sparrows and robins singing, but white-throated sparrows which will soon leave us for the North." The oncoming of fall was noted with: "The Virginia creepers and some maple and gum trees are scarlet and crimson. The oaks are deep, red brown." He told of watching a mother bird bring worms to her babies, of feeding elk at the zoo, and countless other incidents about animals and plants.

Mary Mapes Dodge, who won world fame with *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* and other writings, fondly recalled her father as a companion on nature jaunts. One of her most vivid recollections in adult years was of a trip with him to the Botanical Gardens in New York where some plant experiments were explained. The next day, with

her father's interested approval, Mary started "a little botanical garden" at her bedroom window—a sweet potato in a hanging vase, and seeds planted in old teacups filled with different kinds of soil.

Herbert Hoover was an outstanding geologist and mining engineer before he became President of the United States. He was an "outdoor boy" from babyhood on, and only the worst sort of weather could keep him in the house. His parents took him often to his grandfather's farm where he could herd cattle, plant corn, and tend chickens. Though his father died when the boy was small, his mother found time in her busy life for picnics and other outdoor excursions. It was on these outings that Herbert started collecting rocks—the introduction to his absorbing lifelong interest in geology. By the time he was seven he knew how to fish, forecast storms, and track animals; he loved learning about the ways of birds, snakes, and all other small creatures of the woods.

As a friend of the Hoover family puts it, "Bert read his fairy tales in stones, the everlasting hills, the dawn of creation, the fashioning of a universe." This heritage of nature appreciation has been passed on to Herbert Hoover's sons and grandchildren.

In all countries, men and women have achieved eminence after evincing an early and continuing interest in the world around them, and particularly in nature's ways. Their awareness of nature has brought greater contentment and happiness into their own lives. Indeed, they have enriched the lives of all of us with those achievements of the inquiring mind that has been trained by close and habitual observation.

Why Nature Is Important to Your Child

Modern schools have excellent programs of nature study; but even the best programs cannot take the place of family participation in nature interests. On the other hand, any child whose parents enjoy nature with him finds this of real help with his schoolwork. He will readily discuss ideas that are presented to him at school when he knows his father and mother are interested.

Actually it is not always simple to keep up with the rapid strides made by children. It seemed I had barely stopped smiling over my three-year-old's comments, such as, "I know bees make honey, but I don't see how they get it into jars," when he was coming home from the first grade asking, "What is the difference between rodents and other kinds of animals?" A year later he was likely to interrupt lunch with such posers as: "If dinosaurs were so big and powerful, why did they all die?" Suddenly we had arrived at questions that still puzzle many a scientist.

The important place that nature has in the life of a young child has been sensitively analyzed by Arnold and Beatrice Chandler Gesell. Here is what these eminent experts on child behavior say:

"There is nothing new under the sun, but to childhood all is novelty. The most commonplace things teem with novelty.

"Children are in a stage of sense experience when this warm glow of contact through eye and ear and touch may be transmitted into the life of spirit; when light, shadow, sound, motion, and touch weave a tangle of lovely associations around commonplace experiences and build up a deep appreciation of life and things. Thus the truths of nature become unconsciously associated with emotional response, which deepens and safeguards them. The child learns more through unconscious absorption than through didactic prescription, and in nature study daily contact with the beauty,

motive, and unceasing effort everywhere shown by plant and animal gives an impulse to individual character and sets standards of behavior.

"The child who stands on tiptoe to peep cautiously into the new-found bird's nest, who feels the velvety softness of growing things beneath his feet as he hunts out the tiny wild flowers in the spring, who sows his own garden seed and waits to see the first young green push its way through the dark, moist soil is building up a reverence for life, a sense of kinship with it, which will uphold him in his later and deeper understanding of its meaning."