

Getting kids connected ... naturally

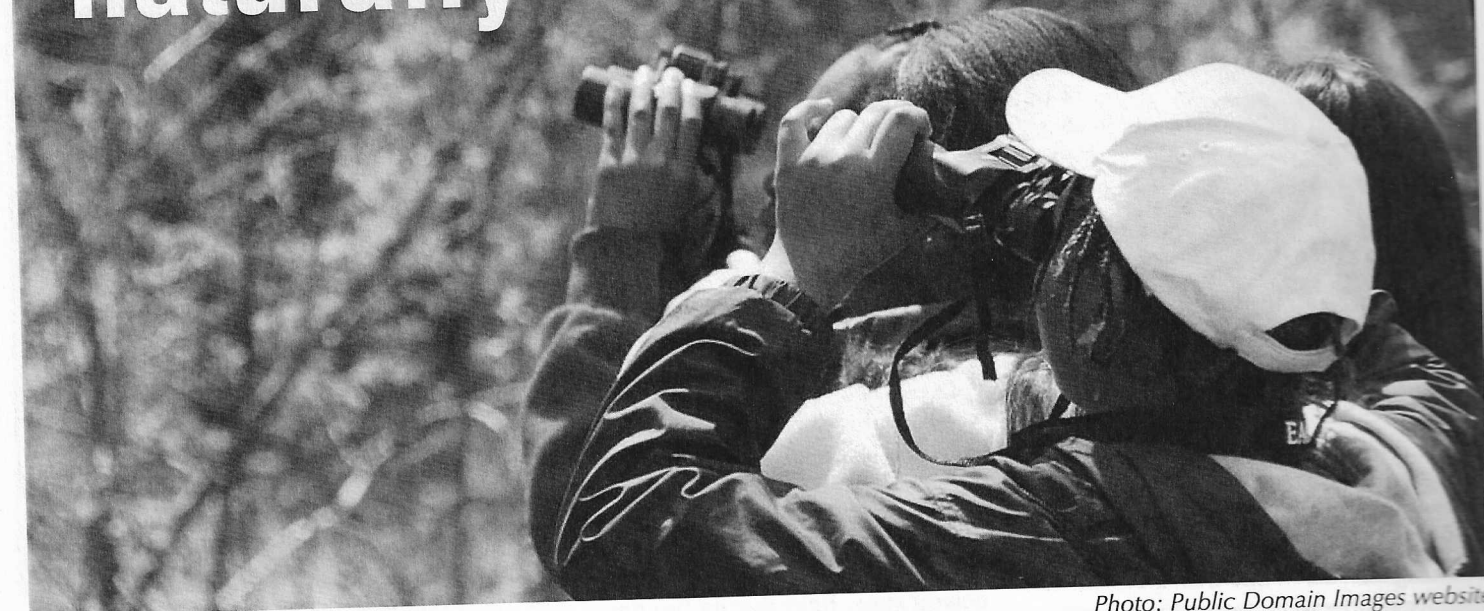


Photo: Public Domain Images website

A group of children looks for birds. One of the easiest ways to get children excited about the outdoors is to take note of their interests and encourage them.

By Kristen Summers

In an era that is more connected than ever, there is a notable disconnect from the things that matter most, with immersion in nature being one of them, especially among our nation's youth. So, what's the secret? How do we get younger generations to delight and revel in the great outdoors? How can we rekindle the bond with the land that once thrived? How can we impart traditional skills and cultivate a profound appreciation for the environment that sustains us all? There's no one-size-fits-all answer to these questions. But here are some tips that may help.

Perhaps you grew up being told that "children are to be seen and not heard." However, it is essential for children to feel valued and understood. They appreciate having a say in decisions instead of being told, "We're doing this." When you approach them with love and respect, children are much more likely to join in on activities with enthusiasm

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

-Rachel Carson, writer & conservationist

instead of reluctance.

Secondly, children like to feel useful; it gives them a sense of purpose and helps them stay focused. Delegating responsibilities by saying "Keep an eye out for this" or "If you'll carry this, I can do that," are some examples. Just let them know how they can assist with whatever activity is planned.

Knowing their personality traits is key to connecting them with the natural world. Take note of their interests and how they can be applied in an outdoor setting. Encourage their participation and stay receptive to their ideas. Selecting activities that are engaging and

suitable for their age will considerably improve the overall experience for both of you.

Is the child adventurous and do they love physical activities like hiking, climbing or biking? Or do they have a quieter and more reserved personality? If so, perhaps observing nature by birdwatching might be of interest. If they tend to become easily overstimulated, calming activities such as cloud watching or stargazing could be a perfect match. And if the child is more creative or imaginative, they might enjoy storytelling, nature crafts or photography instead.

These activities provide brain-stimulating challenges and can teach skills like map reading and navigation with a compass. If they enjoy building, you can incorporate math skills such as measurements and angles to construct a bench, treehouse or other outdoor woodworking projects.

Perhaps they're foodies. Cooking and eating together are excellent avenues for conversation and bonding. Even better is when the ingredients are fresh and locally sourced, and what better way to achieve this than by foraging together? This could also present an opportunity to introduce them to hunting or fishing. Another option is to go picnicking in the woods or have a campfire and cook over the fire.

Do you have a budding collector on your hands? Rockhounding, flower pressing or assembling a collection of leaves or acorns are excellent choices. What about an animal lover? Offer to take them tracking, birdwatching or perhaps shed hunting.

And if you're ever in a pinch, the trusty stick is always there to kick things off! Yes, sticks. And guess what? There's no shortage of them in your woods! They come in all shapes and sizes, brimming with potential, and they even earned a spot in the Toy Hall of Fame in 2008. Truly, they're a timeless classic that never goes out of style!

Always aim to finish on a high note. Everyone appreciates a good incentive, so consider concluding the day or activity with something enjoyable for them to anticipate. You might treat them to dessert, bring them to their favorite playground, or have a cozy movie night. This creates a chance for reflection and a heart-to-heart, where you can celebrate their efforts or achievements, share how much you enjoyed spending time together or express how proud you are of them.

For younger generations to uphold your legacy of land stewardship, it will be a gradual and ongoing process that evolves over time. Each outdoor experience is essential and becomes a building block, and you play an integral role by tending to the child's relationship with the environment. Leading by example is one aspect, and sharing your passion and enthusiasm will undoubtedly have some



Photos: Kristen Summers

Above: It's fun to discover things like a monarch caterpillar munching on milkweed while walking with children through your woodlands. **Below:** A stick just makes exploring a woodland more exciting for children.



influence. Still, your hands-on involvement and those one-on-one moments will be most beneficial. This is what genuinely sows the seeds of stewardship in the young minds of those you mentor.

Take this time to reflect upon your

own youthful experiences. What pivotal moments shaped your journey up to this point? Which aspects of nature ignited your spirit? Recollect all that your senses encountered: the visual splendor captured by your eyes, the cool and gentle touch of the earth on your bare feet, the aromas that provided tranquility, the sounds that piqued your curiosity or perhaps the taste of a berry or a mushroom enjoyed for the very first time. Embrace these cherished memories and share them with children.

We're so grateful for your dedication to nurturing the future custodians of our planet.

For more inspiration about how to engage youth go to wisconsinwoodlands.org/webpages/educational-information-for-kids-and-young-at-heart. There's something for just about everyone!

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