

NATURE PLAY: Do's, Don'ts, and Why Bother



By Katie Slivovsky

DEFINITION: "Nature play" is outdoor play in a natural area—big or small—where children have some level of freedom to explore the living and non-living things such as grass, worms, insects, sand, rocks, flowers and trees. A natural area might be a yard or park; a patch of woods or forest preserve; a creek, pond, marsh or beach. Even a bit of tall grass, a small garden or a puddle can offer nature play!



What's so *great* about nature play?

You've probably heard that playing in nature is good for kids, but what's so *special* about it? Here are just a few of the uniquely wonderful things *nature play* offers:

Challenge, Risk and Freedom of Choice

A great way to build self-esteem is to accomplish something—especially if that accomplishment is preceded by many unsuccessful attempts! (Can you think of a time in your life when this was true?) When kids challenge themselves to climb a tree higher than they thought they could, hold onto a swinging rope longer than they expected, or manage to balance on a fallen log while crossing a creek, they gain an authentic sense of accomplishment: "I did it!" And this comes not from a teacher, coach or parent. It comes from *within*.



At Chicago Children’s Museum—my current workplace—we recently posted this sign to explain to nervous caregivers *why* we were offering an exciting and somewhat scary-looking rope swing experience for kids:



Children build confidence when they:

- Size up a challenge
- Try something new
- Face their fears

What’s really dangerous?

When children don’t test their limits or learn to trust their decisions.

“Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I’ll try again tomorrow.”

—Mary Anne Radmacher

Nature play also offers a certain freedom of choice. Children can decide *for themselves* what challenges and risks they’re ready to undertake—and that’s very empowering.

Discovery and Innovation

Architect Simon Nicholson developed the *Theory of Loose Parts: In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.*

Think about the *amount of variability* among the pebbles, sticks, pine cones, and bits of wood found on the forest floor and compare that to what kids encounter on the average playground. This explains why children sometimes ignore the expensive playground equipment--it responds exactly the same way every time it’s used--and instead play with the wood chips underneath.



The *various* wood shapes can become imaginary animals, tiny treasures, money or tickets for the slide, or whatever else children dream up.

Control and Focus

Remember building forts as a child? Think about why those memories are so powerful. You built it, you made the rules—including who could enter—it was *yours*. It may not have looked very impressive to outsiders but to you it was a kingdom. Due to the variability mentioned above, nature is simply the best place to build forts. Wondering where to go? Bring your kids, a book, a soda, and a lawn chair to your local forest preserve. Relax and read while the kids build in the woods (within earshot--for your comfort more than theirs.)

You might think children with behavioral challenges such as attention deficit disorders will act out in the woods but I have found the opposite to be true. Nature has a calming effect; kids tend to become engaged, interested and focused. When I worked at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle during tadpole season, many a parent of a child with autism told me they couldn't believe their child could/would sit on a rock for an hour or more, simply watching the tadpoles, hands outstretched, hoping to feel a wriggly little body if only for a moment.



“When children play and learn in nature, they do so with more vigor, engagement, imagination and cooperation than in wholly artificial environments and...symptoms of attention deficit and depression are reduced.”

-- National Wildlife Federation

Peace and Comfort

I grew up playing in the woods behind my house. I lived on the edge of a small town and felt at home among the wildlife in the meadow and creek. I had time to think, plan, play, relax and reflect--every day after school. There are many studies that address the affect nature has on our social and emotional well-being. Studies show that just having a *view* of nature through a window improves the level of physical illness in prison inmates as well as improves the test results of students.

<http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/1/45.full>



For my best friend, nature provided much-needed comfort and solace. When she reflects on her challenging childhood, she wonders how she would have survived without the sanctuary of the little patch of woods near her house.

Just imagine what a little time in nature can do for *your* child's overall well-being.

“Children need access to nature the same way they need good nutrition and adequate sleep.” —National Wildlife Federation

What NOT to Do

Ok, so you already know I grew up playing in nature. I love nature so much I got a degree in wildlife biology and became a professional nature educator. I devoted years of my life to connecting children and nature for all the great reasons described above.

Turns out, I was doing something wrong.

Here's my confession: I used to *conclude* my nature-related camps and classes with puppet shows about rain forest destruction and songs about endangered animals. I felt it was my *responsibility* as a nature-lover and conservationist to communicate the latest news about the state of the environment to my young participants. What??!!

Fortunately, my point of view took a sharp turn when I met David Sobel while developing the Hamill Family Play Zoo at Brookfield Zoo. In his booklet, "Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education," Sobel tells the story of an 8-year-old girl who learned about elephant poaching in school. At home, she created a poster for display in her local grocery store with the slogan "Save the Elephants: Don't Buy Ivory Soap." She wanted to help but clearly she didn't understand the issues surrounding poaching.

But cognitive disconnect isn't the only problem. Worse, perhaps, is the emotional toll environmental doom and gloom can have on kids. Sobel coined the term "ecophobia: the fear of nature young kids can develop when their primary contact with the natural world is hearing bad news about the environment."

I looked around at all the "save the earth" messages directed at children. I found statistics about endangered animals and rain-forest destruction on kids' TV shows, in

books and magazines, even on the backs of their animal-cracker and cereal boxes (not to mention the classes kids took with *me!*)

These included some seriously sad messages. An alphabet book about extinct animals tells preschoolers, "L is for Las Vegas frog... People built the city of Las Vegas and paved over all the freshwater springs where this frog used to live. Sadly, we say goodbye to the Las Vegas frog." The very last sentence of the book is, "Let's hope human beings never become extinct."

There have always been global problems--but only recently have kids been made to feel responsible for solving them. When I think back to my own childhood, I wonder how my friends and I would have reacted to cereal-box messages like *find a cure for polio* or *stop the Vietnam War*.

By working closely with early childhood experts, I learned these concepts are just too abstract and complex for kids who still believe in the Tooth Fairy. Children aren't developmentally ready to understand the issues or reasonable solutions.

Unfortunately there's a double whammy here: heavy conservation messages directed at children are at an all-time high; free time playing in nature is at an all-time low. Not even the experts know what will come of this. (For more, read "Last Child in the Woods" by Richard Louv.)

A Better Approach

When psychologist Louise Chawla interviewed environmentally-active adults, she found that they attributed their commitment to two things: 1) many hours spent outdoors [as children] and 2) an adult who gave nature 'appreciative attention'. This was the recipe of my own childhood--lazy summers spent exploring the creek with my dog, and a dad who understood how exciting it was to find a crawdad under an overturned rock. ***Why didn't I realize that what brought me to my career was the fun I had exploring the woods as a kid, not hearing alarming news about the environment?*** If you're a nature lover, ask yourself, "how did my love of nature develop?" and offer your children those same opportunities.

"Let us allow children to love the earth before we ask them to save it." --David Sobel



By the time I had my own two kids, I had learned a thing or two about age-appropriate nature play and conservation messages and had developed the following approach:

A three-step plan to “avoid ecophobia”:

- 1) back off the bad news** (at least until middle school!)
- 2) make time for nature play**
- 3) use good “environmental manners.”**

When my children were in early elementary school, they didn’t know the meaning of the word "endangered." But they could tell you what it felt like to hold a worm or lie in the grass under the stars. They learned to turn off the water when they brushed their teeth and took leftovers to the compost pile. These are good “environmental manners”—done not out of fear but out of habit. Now that my children are teens, they have their own connection to nature and favorite earth-friendly practices.



Nine-year-old Leah Slivovsky feeling empowered after picking up litter one Earth Day.

The following chart provides activity ideas and earth-friendly actions based on broad, developmental categories. Do whichever ones seem fun and appropriate for you and your family. And the best part? There’s no expertise needed! Just a desire to appreciate and explore. Enjoy!



“It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world.”

–Rachel Carson, scientist and author, *Silent Spring* and *The Sense of Wonder*”

The Age of Nature Play

| Age | Interest / Ability | Activity Ideas | Good Environmental Manners** |
|------------|---|--|--|
| Birth to 3 | Sensory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place your baby on a blanket under a tree to watch the leaves sway in the wind. Invite your child to touch and smell grass, mud, sand, and water on their hands and feet. Walk around the block with your child and a handful of crayons; look for things in nature that match the colors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-3 year olds can begin to place items in the compost pile or sort items in recycling bins |
| 4 to 7 | Sensory + Empathy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peek under rocks and fallen logs for surprises like worms, larvae, mushrooms, tracks, and, if you're lucky, a toad! Walk around the block with an egg carton. Fill it up with pebbles, wood chips, seeds, and other interesting bits. Build empathy by comparing the needs of wildlife to your child, "The bird needs food and water; so do you" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turn off lights when leaving a room Turn off water when brushing teeth Pick up litter at home and school (this a great activity to suggest to teachers looking for age-appropriate ways to celebrate Earth Day.) |
| 8 to 11 | Sensory + Empathy + Exploration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climb trees, balance on fallen logs, wade in creeks, catch tadpoles, care for a pet, go camping! This is prime fort-building age: designate a kids-only fort building area behind the garage or by a fence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect recyclables after sporting events; bring a bag or bin to the game! Think about school-related conservation efforts such as helping teachers recycle or minimize use of disposable items. |
| 12 & up | Sensory + Empathy + Exploration + Social Action | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Venture further from home on day-long hiking treks and extended camping trips. Allow as much unsupervised time in nature as your comfort level allows. Older children may enjoy helping younger children do the above activities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand your reach in the community and help raise funds, market and/or participate in clean-ups and restoration efforts. Ask your child, "What problem do <i>you</i> want to help solve?" |

*** I call these good "environmental manners" because you're simply teaching children how to be nice to the environment. Kids can do these actions out of habit, not fear.*

About the author: Katie Slivovsky is a mother of two, Exhibit Development Director at Chicago Children’s Museum, nature writer, speaker, and life-long nature lover. Contact her at www.helipadparent.com or KatieS@ChicagoChildrensMuseum.Org.

Photo credit: Unless otherwise noted, all photos are of five-year-old twins, Henry and Jettie Hipschen, taken by their mother, Liza Sullivan.

Resources

Keynote address by Katie Slivovsky, “*Avoiding Ecophobia: The Don’ts and Dos of Age-Appropriate Nature Education.*” (Starts at 8:00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMAIN2L8dBg>

Chawla, Louise, “Childhood Experiences Associated with Care for the Natural World: A theoretical Framework for Empirical Results,” *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 17 (4): 144-170, 2007.

Louv, Richard, “Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder,” *Algonquin Books*, 2008.

Slivovsky, Katie, “Save the Elephants: Don’t Buy Ivory Soap”, *Newsweek*, Aug/2004. <http://www.newsweek.com/my-turn-save-elephants-dont-buy-ivory-soa-126097>

Sobel, David, “Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education,” *Nature Literacy Monograph Series No. 1*, Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society, 1996.

Wilson, Ruth, “Fostering a Sense of Wonder During the Early Childhood Years,” *Greydon Press*, 1993.

National Wildlife Federation: <http://www.nwf.org/What-We-Do/Kids-and-Nature/Programs/Nature-Play-Spaces.aspx>

Especially for teachers:

Sobel, David, “Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators,” *Stenhouse Publishers*, 2009.

Chalufour, Ingrid and Karen Worth, “Discovering Nature with Young Children,” *Redleaf Press*, 2003.



“Climbing in trees and hiding in trees precedes saving trees.” –David Sobel