

Helping Our Children Fall in Love with the Outdoors

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Did you know the average North American child now spends about seven hours a day staring at screens and mere minutes engaged in unstructured play outdoors? Yet recent research indicates that experiences in nature are essential for healthy growth. Regular exposure to nature can help relieve stress, depression, and attention deficits. It can reduce bullying, combat obesity, and boost academic scores. Most critical of all, abundant time in natural settings seems to yield long-term benefits in kids' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Of course, spending time outdoors is important for adults as well!

Growing up, Scott Sampson -- the paleontologist and CEO of Science World in Vancouver, Canada -- went on annual camping trips to the Rocky Mountains with his family. However, he said in a recent TED talk, "This was not where I fell in love with nature. That happened close to home -- looking for rocks in the backyard, playing kick-the-can in the neighborhood, bushwhacking in the local forest."

Sampson recommends three steps we can take with our children to connect with nature.

Notice: Take time to see what is around us when we step outside of our homes. Look at the sky and notice the clouds, see the many variations of the color green on a walk, ask questions like "What does the air feel like?" or "Did you hear that bird in our backyard?" We impact the future when we value and care about the natural world together with our children because they value what we value.

Engage: Allow kids the time to interact with nature whether it is collecting sticks, throwing rocks into a pond or taking an adventure (hike) together. Tell them about your own experiences and memories -- apple-picking a local farm, growing pumpkins in your garden, seeing an eclipse, or using binoculars to look at birds. Check out books from the library to help them find out more information on things that they are interested -- "Why do crickets chirp?" "Where do birds go when it rains?" or "What kind of cloud is that?"

Wonder: When it comes to the natural world, Sampson says that love and wonder should go hand in hand -- if we want our children to connect with it, they need to have the chance to be captivated by it. He says, "You can give them amazing experiences like harvesting and eating plants that they themselves planted and nurtured."

As parents, we are always aware of the potential dangers of exploring nature whether it is our child having a close encounter with poison ivy or a snake, getting too close to rushing water or climbing high into the branches of an inviting tree. As you choke back the words "Be Careful!" consider these tips that can help foster awareness and problem solving in your child. Say:

Notice how...these rocks are slippery, that branch is strong.

Do you see---the poison ivy, your friends nearby?

Try moving...your feet carefully, quickly, strongly.

Try using your...hands, feet, arms, legs.

Can you hear...the rushing water, the singing birds, the wind?

Do you feel...stable on that rock, the heat from the fire?

Are you feeling...scared, excited, tired, safe?

What's your plan...if you climb that boulder, cross that log?

What can you use...to get across, to help you stable yourself?

Where will you...put that rock, climb that tree, dig that hole?

How will you...get down, go up, get across?

Who will...be with you, go with you, help you if...?

To view the full TED Talk: "How to Raise a Wild Child" by Scott Sampson
www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Mn4ve9fLsuA

Sampson also wrote a great book on the same topic www.amazon.com/How-Raise-Wild-Child-Science/dp/0544705297?tag=teco06-20