



Early Childhood NEWS

Five Things to Do Outdoors With Children

By Donna Johnson

What are some of your fondest childhood memories? Catching fireflies on a summer night? Watching squirrels scamper through crunchy leaves? Melting snowflakes on the tip of your tongue?

Chances are, some of your fondest memories involve nature. But today, with so many activities vying for children's attention—from soccer practice to computer games to television—it's easy to forget that simple activities, like a walk in the park, can be just as rewarding.

The fact is, communing with nature is the perfect hands-on activity. It's educational, entertaining, and economical. And it isn't just for budding biologists either. Nature can provide a foundation for many subjects. An ancient tree might spark the imagination of a future historian. Petals on a flower can give a little mathematician something to count. And a rainbow can stir the soul of a young artist.

Convinced? Okay then, get outdoors! Here are five easy nature activities to get you started.

1. **Make a Leaf Mask.** Some animals such as toads and grasshoppers wear colors that help them blend into their habitats. By wearing an autumn leaf mask, children can blend in too. First, take a nature walk to collect some fallen leaves. Next, draw the outline of a mask on cardboard. Almost any shape will work as long as you draw holes for eyes. Cut out the eyes, then let the children cut out the mask. Punch holes in the sides of the mask. Thread a piece of string through each hole and knot. Have the children glue leaves onto the mask with white craft glue. Let the glue dry completely before tying the mask on a child's head.

2. **Go on a Seed Safari.** Seeds are baby plants just waiting for the right environment to grow. They cannot move around on their own so they often hitch rides on people and passing animals. These sneaky hitchhikers can be caught by dragging an old pair of pantyhose or wearing an old pair of socks over shoes while walking through the woods. Both methods will pick up seeds the children can bring back to the center for planting.

3. **Bury a Treasure.** Encourage the children to draw a treasure map to represent the child care center. Include landmarks such as playgrounds, fences, trees, bushes, etc. Next, plant a variety of spring-flowering bulbs such as crocuses, tulips, hyacinths, or daffodils in different spots around the center. As each bulb gets planted, the children mark its place on the map with an X. Cut out pictures of the flowers from the bulb packages and glue them onto the map as a key.

4. **Be a Cloud Watcher.** Spend an afternoon watching clouds morph into animals and other shapes. Bring along a pad of paper, crayons, glue, and a bag of cotton balls. Encourage the children to draw the shapes they see, then glue cotton balls onto the drawing to look like clouds.

5. **Measure It With Sticks.** Long ago, before rulers with inches and centimeters, people used all sorts of things for measuring. People used objects from nature, such as sticks and stones. Encourage the children to find their own natural ruler and use it to measure several objects. How many leaves high is the art table? How many sticks long is the toddler room?

Donna Johnson is editor of *Your Big Backyard*, a monthly nature magazine for children ages three to six published by the National Wildlife Federation.

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