

# Children in Nature: Why It Matters

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Children of all ages have less contact with the natural world than ever before. Does it matter? Won't they grow up just fine anyway? Do they even need nature anymore?

Emerging research into the relationship between children and nature would suggest that they do.

Research has shown that even the youngest children are drawn to the natural world both emotionally and cognitively. Young children can readily differentiate natural from man-made objects. This discriminatory

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ability is part of our adaptive response – our ancient survival instinct, if you will. We come equipped to know what is edible, dangerous, useful and beautiful.

Research also confirms that movement is essential for the growth of your child's intelligence, but movement just to move narrows the scope of development. Movement in nature not only strengthens the muscles but also aids in the development of auditory discrimination, visual cues for depth perception, balance, coordination, agility, and offers a variety of sensory stimuli in tune with the child's capacity to absorb. But most importantly, the child, free to explore in nature, absorbs this world in context. He absorbs how where the fish swim is related to where the trees grow and the animals find shelter and ultimately to how Man fits in.

Nature offers your child powerful impressions of reality. How living things move for example, is absorbed just by being in proximity to living moving things; the flow of the creek, the grace of the swimming ducks, how the stick your child just threw into the creek is carried on the current, how the wind bends the tall grasses or how the birds move through the air.

Current research into what children believe based on the sources of their information confirms this direct knowledge assertion. The research concludes that

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when children are presented with information from two different sources, one being direct experience and the other a contradictory verbal explanation, the child is more likely to identify reality if he has seen it or touched it rather than being told what it is.

Direct experience in nature frames the child's references for all future understanding about what is real and what is not. A few years ago, a child was mauled at the zoo by an animal the child was scolding. The child was waiting for the animal to talk back to him. This child's frame of reference heavily favored talking animals on television, on videos and in children's books.

The wild places aid in the child's comprehension of physical planes of reality; what is high and low, steep and level, cold and hot, wet and dry, stiff and malleable, smooth and rough, not to mention living and non-living.

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His understanding of the physical phenomena can be easily and readily affected just by being there. No need for lessons, lectures or demonstrations. Free and relaxed exploration is all you need to provide, your child will do the rest. Hands-on muddy, wet and free exploration will aid in her cognition, will develop motor control and will map the mathematical mind of your child onto the fundamental plane of his life. It will evoke his natural sense of wonder at the world and his place in it, especially if you, whom he loves, loves nature too.

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## What else can you do?

Whenever possible, choose the local open space rather than the playground.

Do not carry your child; let her walk.

Share books with your child that show the reality of nature in its appropriate context, devoid of talking

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animals and lurid illustrations of scary fantasy creatures. Pictures of real plants and animals serve to clarify for your child a representation of what is real.

Consider the kind of clothing that is optimal for your child's explorations in nature. Sturdy shoes that can easily be wiped off and clothes that can be washed and are not so precious that mud stains are a problem work

best. Further, the more your child moves about in the out-of-doors, the less he needs the bulky, movement-inhibiting outerwear.

Give as gifts tools for the out of doors such as small trowels, buckets, seeds for planting and rubber boots as well as other items useful to the natural environments of your particular locale. Older children would enjoy a compass, a thermometer and barometer, and books for identifying local flora and fauna.

And finally, you can renew a personal affinity for nature as more time is spent there with your children. Slow down and savor the wonder and contentment of spending time with the source of life. As you do, so will your child.

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*fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture*