



Get Your Kids Outdoors

Kids spend way too much time indoors. Get them outside and expose them to the wonders of nature -- starting in your own backyard.

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By James McCommons

Children are spending less time in nature. There are plenty of reasons why. The lure of [video games](#) and television. Parents' fear of everything from sexual predators to insect-borne diseases. Schools cutting back on outdoor education. The fact that suburban environments tend to isolate kids from natural landscapes. Children who have opportunities to spend time in nature -- whether through programs such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts, or the efforts of schools and parents -- get plenty of benefits. Kids with attention-deficit issues learn to focus. Walking, hiking, and exploring nature provide opportunities for daily and weekly exercise, which helps combat weight problems and stress. But it's not just children who need to get in the woods. In many cases, parents may have missed out, too, having grown up as children of the indoors. Reconnect to the thrill of fresh air and discovery in the natural world.

Discover Your Backyard

Nature doesn't have to be wilderness. Keep a portion of your yard wild. Plant flowers to attract butterflies, put up a bird feeder, take out the turf grass, and put in shrubs or prairie plants. You want a place where wild things are.

Introduce Local Nature

Some children only learn about nature by watching *Animal Planet*, which teaches kids more about wildlife in foreign lands than in their own region. "I would tell kids, 'Hey, we live with exotic animals too. Some of the birds here came from Argentina and Chile. Now they're looking for a place to nest, raise their babies, and eat a gazillion mosquitoes,'" says Michael Scheiwe, a botanist who has taught environmental education courses to children in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. "We tried to create a sense of wonder with kids and let them know that exotic animals aren't just on TV." To close their knowledge gap, take kids to local nature centers and camps, encourage your child's school to run field trips to such places, and enroll your youngsters in ecology or nature classes suited to their age and typically offered by local science centers, nature clubs, and community colleges.

Find a Secret Spot

Help your children find a spot outside where they can sit silently for a few minutes each day, engaging all five senses in the world around them. "If you can get them to really focus, there's a vitality that comes into the brain," says Ellen Haas, administrative director at the Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, Washington, and coauthor of *Coyote's Guide to Connecting Kids with Nature for Parents, Teachers, and Outdoor Educators*. Getting any kid to be still and silent is no small feat. Camp counselors play hide-and-seek games in which children must be absolutely quiet. "Once they're sitting still, they're more likely to look around and start watching a beetle crawling around their feet," says Haas.

Take Up Geocaching

Little kids rarely need coaxing to get outside, take a walk, and get dirty. Teenagers can be harder to lure away from the electronics. "For someone who is patterned on a short attention span -- used to things beeping and coming at you -- a quiet walk can be a little freaky," says Haas. Geocaching combines the outdoors with a teen's lust for electronic gadgetry. In these high-tech scavenger hunts -- in which the whole family can take part -- participants find hidden caches of toys or souvenirs using Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers. Basic units cost less than \$100 and are available at sporting goods and variety stores. Go to any one of dozens of geocaching Web sites (start at geocaching.com) to get coordinates of a nearby cache that you can enter into the GPS unit. From there, it's a matter of following the GPS into the woods, then using clues provided online to find the location of the cache.