

The Peaceable Kingdom: 5 Tips for Helping Children Develop Respect for Animals and Nature

A generation or two ago, childhood meant long hours spent playing outdoors. Children played games like Kick the Can and Hide and Seek, often staying outside until dark when parents called them in. Children had a casual, intuitive relationship with nature, understanding seasonal changes and life cycles through firsthand experience. These experiences strengthened their minds and bodies and offered opportunities to explore, ask questions, take risks, and solve problems.

It seems obvious that the more time children spend in nature, the more likely they are to develop respect for it, yet many children today have limited contact with the outdoors. Only 6 percent of children age 9 to 13 spend time playing outdoors each week, according to the [Nature Conservancy](#). These same children (age 8 to 18) spend as much as 53 hours each week on electronic media – more than a full-time job! After-school programs, sports, extracurricular activities, homework, and media all vie for children’s attention. At the same time, parents often worry more about safety than previous generations or have fewer natural areas nearby. This article explores simple ways to reverse this trend and help children appreciate the natural world.

Get outdoors. Make outdoor play a priority in your family. Limit after-school activities to just one or two per week for elementary-age children and encourage unstructured play. Go for walks or bike rides. Dig in the garden or head to a park. During good weather, make the outdoors an extension of your home. Eat meals, play board games, work on homework, or read a book outside. Regular outdoor play can increase school performance, reduce the risk of obesity, depression, and ADHD symptoms, and improve your child’s overall outlook on life, according to the [National Wildlife Federation](#).

Read high-quality children’s literature about nature. Children’s literature can be a powerful force for good when used intentionally. Try to build a family read-aloud time into your daily routine and regularly choose books that foster a love of animals and nature. E.B. White’s classics, *Charlotte’s Web* or *The Trumpet of the Swan* are good choices for older children. For younger children, try Leo Lionni’s *Fish is Fish* or *In the Tall, Tall Grass* by Denise Fleming. For more ideas, visit [Project Wild](#) for a comprehensive list.

Follow your child’s interests. Young children are naturally interested in life science. Observe your child and build on areas of interest. Perhaps your child is fascinated by an ant hill near your home, for example. Gather a few books about ants from the library or do a quick Internet search to learn more about ants. Make simple lists, graphs, or books with your child to extend learning.

Get a pet – or a plant. Pets can be a lot of work, but children learn so much from their care. Consider getting a pet for your family, choosing one that fits your family’s lifestyle. No time or space for a dog? How about a beta fish or hermit crab? Let your child help care for houseplants or a small vegetable garden to develop responsibility and empathy for all living things.

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Join an organization. If the thought of trekking into the woods intimidates you, join a [nature club](#) or sign up for birdwatching, fishing, or tracking classes at a local recreation district. How about service opportunities, such as restoring local trails or volunteering at a nature preserve? By joining an organization, you'll have access to ample outdoor opportunities and build energy and enthusiasm for the natural world.

Children who have regular interactions with nature become adults with a deep reverence and respect for the natural world. Whether you live in a rural area, a suburban landscape, or an urban jungle, make outdoor play time for your children a priority. Their health – and the planet's health – depends on it.

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