

## Young Children and the Environment: Building a Connection

In this age of television and computers, it can seem harder than ever to get children outside. However, children's interaction with nature is an important prerequisite for an appreciation and respect for the environment. Noted nature-focused author and journalist Richard Louv poses a troubling question concerning today's children and the future. "Studies have shown that people who love the environment said they had great outdoor experiences as kids," Louv writes. "If that ends, where will our future environmental stewards come from?"



Many people agree that now is the time to take steps to improve and protect our environment. Once children become personally involved with nature, they start to understand how their own actions affect the world around them. In this way, concern for the environment will come naturally as children grow, creating a sense of environmental ownership. The hope is that with increased exposure to all that the earth has to offer, the next generation will work to preserve this place we call home.

### Cause for Concern

In many communities, children's familiarity and connection with nature is dwindling. Recent studies have shown that children only spend 30 minutes per week outdoors in activities that are not formally organized. Children ages 3 to 12 spend only one percent of their time outdoors, but they spend about 27 percent of their time watching television (Lekies and Wells, 2006). Those who worry about children being disconnected from nature have reason to be concerned. Out and About

Getting children outside can be as easy as planning an outdoor play activity. But how can teachers teach young children to respect and appreciate nature? That must come naturally, by introducing children to nature and letting them experience it in their own ways. In Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods*, he suggests activities to engage children with the natural world. Following are the top ten tips from his book that The Conservation Fund has chosen as their favorites, along with ideas for incorporating them into a preschool setting:

**10. Go "cloudspotting."** It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a...dinosaur? Have children look for interesting shapes in the clouds and talk about what they see. Discuss the different types of precipitation that fall from the clouds and how rain helps plants, trees, and crops grow.

**9. Become “nature collectors.”** Bring back the tradition of collecting leaves, stones, and other “treasures” from outside. Create a place in your classroom to display children’s nature collections, label each item, and encourage children to tell the class each time they add to their collections. Be sure to talk with children about what types of things are appropriate to take from the outdoors and what things need to be left alone.

**8. Have children ask their grandparents or older adults about the outdoor activities they enjoyed as children.** Invite children to tell the class about games their grandparents played outside or other ways nature played a role in their youth. Have the class participate in one of the activities mentioned.

**7. Adopt the “sunny day” rule.** When the sun is out, be sure to take children outside and keep them exploring as long as possible. Create structured activities for exploring the natural areas you have access to locally, as well as allowing opportunities for children’s natural curiosity to guide them. Be sure to apply sunscreen or other sun protection before heading outdoors.



**6. Go bird-watching in your schoolyard.** Talk about the different kinds of birds you see and create a class book about the activity. Allow each child to contribute one page to the bird book by drawing a picture and dictating a sentence to accompany it.

**5. Get down and dirty with soil.** Let children dig and play in dirt with shovels and pails. Talk about the importance of soil and its role in the environment.

**4. Adopt a tree.** Take pictures of a nearby tree and record its changes through the seasons. Notice animals that live in the tree and make time to talk about the class’s adopted tree throughout the year. Use the activity to engage in shared writing or as the basis for a unit on trees.

**3. Go harvesting.** Take a field trip with children to pick apples, berries, or pumpkins. Make a healthy snack from the produce you harvest. If this isn’t an option, take children outside to harvest grass, dandelions, or other easily renewable greenery and use the materials in an art project. Discuss with children how the earth produces many of the things we eat and use.

**2. Go camping in your own schoolyard.** Use old blankets or sheets and classroom chairs to make tents on the playground. Have children imagine what it would be like to sleep outside.

**1. Keep a “wonder bowl.”** Encourage children to fill their pockets with interesting natural objects they find outside such as rocks, acorns, or leaves. Have them empty their pockets into a bowl so the class can examine their treasures.

### **Making Your Classroom “Green”**

Helping children experience and appreciate nature is the first step in creating environmentally aware teens and adults. The next step is setting a positive example through environmentally friendly living. Going green can seem intimidating; however, if you start small by making one change in your classroom or teaching practice every week or so, soon you’ll be helping the environment without even thinking about it! Try integrating these pro-environment activities into your everyday classroom routine.

- Start an in-classroom recycling program. Use different brightly colored bins for cardboard, paper, and plastic. You can teach children sorting skills by explaining which materials go into which bins. Consider creating a classroom job for management of the recycling area.
- To save resources, reuse paper, supplies, toys, clothing, and other reusable items in the classroom. Use the library whenever possible for items like books, CDs, and DVDs. Create a “be nice, use it twice” pile for paper that has writing or printing on only one side.
- Be sure to turn off lights and running water when not in use. Teach children to get in the habit, too. Explain that these simple actions conserve energy and resources.
- Keep indoor plants in the classroom and teach children how to take care of them. This will allow the class to connect with nature and help children learn what living things need to survive.
- If possible, plant a garden in the schoolyard or make a window box garden. Grow flowers or vegetables and help children chart their progress.
- Take nature walks and study insects, birds, squirrels, or rabbits in their natural habitat.
- At snack time, talk about where our food comes from and the importance of choosing healthy foods.
- Use eco-friendly cleaning products. Strive to keep the classroom free of toxins and chemicals.

## Further Reading

Consider sharing these books with the class to help pique children's interest in nature:

- *Flower Garden* by Eve Bunting
- *Jack's Garden* by Henry Cole
- *Where Once There Was a Wood* by Denise Fleming
- *Planet Earth Gets Well* by Madeline Kaplan
- *Are Trees Alive?* by Debbie Miller
- *A Grand Old Tree* by Mary Newell DePalma

The following books are full of activities that can help teach children to love and respect nature and the environment:

- *Sharing Nature With Children* by Joseph Cornell
- *Teaching Kids to Love the Earth* by Marina Lachecki
- *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv
- *I Love Dirt!: 52 Activities to Help You and Your Kids Discover the Wonders of Nature* by Jennifer Ward

## Preparing for the Future

Through activities that create positive experiences with nature, teachers can help foster relationships between children and the environment. As those relationships grow, children will develop an appreciation for all that our planet has to offer, for their own generation and those that follow.

## References

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