



Nurturing Nature Play: Ten Tips for Parents

Many parents and other adults see the value of restoring nature-based play to children's lives, yet they may be vexed about how to go about it. It's nothing like enrolling a child in a soccer league, or going on an interpretive hike! Instead, it starts with just getting kids into a patch of real nature where they are free to roam. Then the adult's role is to be a gentle facilitator who unobtrusively watches over the play, without directing it. Use restraint, not assertiveness! Let the children lead; give them the freedom to follow their own interests, discoveries, and delights as they explore nature. These simple tips may help you along.

- 1. Travel down memory lane** — Apply the "test of remembered childhoods." Use your own good memories of nature play to guide the experiences you'd like today's children to enjoy.
 - 2. Preach it, brother! (or sister!)** — Be an advocate for nature play. Talk it up with friends, teachers, parent organizations - anyone who can influence children's lives and might join in efforts to restore nature play. And ask about folks' own memories of childhood play; it's a great conversation starter!
 - 3. Plan on no plan** — Forget structured activity plans and your adult expectations. Get the kids to a rich natural area and let them decide what to do, where to explore, and how to play.
 - 4. Trust in nature** — It's a fun kinda place that doesn't need fancy play equipment or adult instructors! And don't give up if you hear, "I'm bored." Be patient, and kids will start exploring on their own.
 - 5. Embrace flex time** — Stay off the clock as much as possible; let the kids' discoveries and active engagement determine the schedule. Watch their play, not your watch.
 - 6. Be a lifeguard, not a teacher** — Let nature be the children's play partner, not you. Intervene only if danger seems imminent, or if you're asked to help.
 - 7. Small is beautiful** — Nature play works great with very young children, too - and they only need small bits of nature! Even crawling babies can delight in the smells and textures of a little herb garden.
 - 8. All kids come in wash and dry** — Dirt don't hurt, and don't sweat the wet! So what if it's messy? You can hose 'em down at the end! Keep old plastic bags handy to protect car seats from wet kids.
 - 9. Wash, rinse, repeat** — Frequent nature play is what best builds kids' lasting bonds with the natural world. Make nature a favorite friend for them to play with, time and time again!
 - 10. There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing** — Play outside in all safe weather conditions. Why not play in the rain, or wake your kids at 2 a.m. to play in a gentle snowfall?
- Bonus tip: No naturalist needed!** — You don't need to be a nature expert. If your child finds something they're interested in, use books or the internet to foster the learning process.

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

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