

Family Friday

Children are natural explorers. Set some basic boundaries, and let the child discover. The learning will come. Children use all of their senses to explore. They look and listen to observe what is happening around them, touch what they can reach, smell the fresh scents of nature, and occasionally taste when given permission. They run, jump, dig, and climb as they discover new places.

For a child, everything is new—even the tiniest things are interesting and exciting. In today's entertainment-driven world, exploring the outdoors is an opportunity for children to actively engage in learning. Here are a few steps you can take to guide children's exploration of the great outdoors.

Explore safely. Join your children in the fun if they want you to, and keep an eye on them. Before you begin, dress appropriately and teach your child the basic safety rules of the outdoors. Simplicity is often the key to establishing safety rules, and there is usually no need to restrict children. They rarely do something that makes them uncomfortable, unless someone is urging them on or daring them.

Let children choose what to explore. Let children explore, and see what they do on their own without offering suggestions. Do they run? Build? Climb? Even an activity as simple as digging leads to exploration. Children learn how to dig, the way soil feels, the angle of the slope before loose dirt slides back down, and the difference between dry and wet soil.

Ask open-ended questions. As children explore on their own, remain involved. Ask about their discoveries. Ask open-ended questions they can understand and answer with their observations. "What did you find? Oh, a bug? What does it look like? How does it move?" You do not have to know all the answers to children's questions. Discuss what you see—the shape of leaves, the color of the soil, the movement of the grasses. The more your child observes, the more the world around him will make sense. Discovering how to learn through observation is important. Your child doesn't have to know the names of all the plants and animals he finds. He will learn through his observations. You can even suggest he make up descriptive names of his own.

Touch, lift, look under. Children need to touch the natural world to more fully understand it. In some cases, gently touching an object with one finger may be helpful. For example, gently nudge a frog or a grasshopper to help a child learn how animals move. When possible, though, examine an object from all sides. Looking carefully at the underside of a log and then carefully replacing it, for example, helps children understand that creatures live under the log and that not disturbing the creatures' habitat is important.

Guide children to draw conclusions from the observations they've made. The best learning occurs when children come to conclusions for themselves. It would be easy to draw on your own knowledge to say, "It's fall now. See, the leaves are red. Remember that they used to be green?" Instead, try asking questions or describing what you see, feel, hear, and smell. "Do you remember what color the leaves were last time we took this walk? What do you see now?" This modeling will help your child learn to use her own senses when exploring. Remembering and sharing helps a child learn, and shared memories bring cohesiveness as a family.

Some Cautions

Although we want children to explore at will, there are certain precautions that you will need to take. Teach children to:

- Be aware of the environment and the creatures that live there.
- Always watch where they put their hands and feet. If they left shoes outside, make sure they empty their shoes before putting them back on.
- Use clear cups and look before they drink. No one wants to accidentally drink an insect!
- Be wary of brown recluse spiders (also known as violin, or fiddleback, spiders), black widow spiders, scorpions, and poisonous snakes.
- Be cautious when lifting boards or rocks to find animals and insects. Also be careful to observe what is living there without disturbing their environment.
- Recognize poison ivy, poison sumac, and poison oak. If you or your child comes into contact with any of these plants, scrub the exposed area with dish detergent or another strong soap.

Also prepare yourself and your child to encounter insects and stains.

- Wear old clothes you don't mind getting dirty.
- Wear light-colored clothing to keep insects at bay. Some insects are attracted to dark colors.
- Wear a scarf or hat when walking through the woods.