



# TOGETHER IN NATURE

*Pathways to a Stronger, Closer Family*



by Sara St. Antoine  
with Cheryl Charles and Richard Louv

Supported in part by



Together in Nature: Pathways to a Stronger, Closer Family

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*“Fresh air, a gentle breeze, the warmth of the sun, the fragrance of flowers and grass can calm both a fussy baby and a frazzled parent, allowing for one of those special moments of quiet connection.”*



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For Debra Scott, taking her daughter on weekly nature outings with other families was a revelation. “I noticed on those days my daughter slept better and had a better appetite. I noticed I slept better as well and was in a better mood. Especially in the winter months, stressful things seemed less important after a good play outside.”

As you may know, forming a close bond with your child is one of the most important things you can do—from infancy right up through the teenage years. Strong early bonds with parents, grandparents, and other caregivers help children feel a sense of trust and confidence throughout their lifetimes.

But nurturing those bonds requires things that are often in short supply in today’s world: time to slow down, focus, and block out the distractions of cell phones and other electronic devices; patience to listen and respond thoughtfully to a child’s needs and comments; and the capacity to keep daily stress in check enough to enjoy life’s small and great shared moments.

For all these reasons, spending time in nature with your children may be an ideal way to nurture family bonds, whether you’re dealing with a fussy infant or a recalcitrant teen. Nature doesn’t have ring tones or deadlines. You can reach it without spending a penny. And you can even get outdoors together with other families to increase the sociability and fun. As parents like Debra Scott have discovered, getting outdoors can help both you and your child feel better, while giving you common ground for discovery and play.

*“Nature can be co-experienced by parent and child in ways that Chuck E. Cheese’s just can’t.”*  
—Ron Swaisgood, biologist and co-founder of Family Adventures in Nature

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT AND STRONG FAMILY BONDS



Child psychologists and other experts in human development know the importance of strong family bonds. These bonds begin in infancy with what is known as “attachment”—a powerful relationship that forms between a child and his or her primary caregivers in the first months of life. Psychiatrist John Bowlby was the first to describe a theory of attachment more than fifty years ago, calling it a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, research informed by Bowlby and his colleague Mary Ainsworth (who developed the means to assess quality of the parent-child attachment) has confirmed that a secure parent-child attachment is a crucial foundation for a child’s later competence and well-being.

<sup>1</sup> Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. I. Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).



Psychiatrist John Bowlby, the “father” of attachment theory, was also a devoted naturalist. In fact, his theory of attachment draws heavily from the research discipline known as ethology, the study of animal behavior. Ethologists tend to approach their studies from an ecological or systems perspective. Bowlby saw attachment as an adaptive behavior that contributed to human survival, much as other species have adaptive behaviors (migration, care for young) to help them survive.

According to recent studies, about 70% of U.S. babies develop a secure attachment, though some say this number is declining. The remaining 30% are said to have some form of insecure attachment. These insecurely attached children are at greater risk of experiencing anxiety, insecurity, behavioral problems, and relationship difficulties throughout their lifetimes. In contrast, a secure attachment supports the child’s development of trust, confidence, empathy and self-regulation (the ability to manage difficult emotions and control impulses)—important qualities for getting along in a social world. In addition, recent studies of brain development have demonstrated a strong connection between secure attachment and a host of mental processes—including verbal reasoning, planning, working memory, and problem solving—that fall under the umbrella term *executive function*.



What does it take to give your child a secure attachment? You’ll be relieved to know it’s relatively simple stuff. Soothe a crying baby, feed a hungry one, look a baby in the eyes, smile and play peekaboo, talk warmly and playfully to a baby, and also know when to give a baby quiet space when he or she does not want hugs or tickles or food. These responses can be summed up as follows:

- **emotional availability** (being emotionally present to the child);
- **affective sharing** (responding together over shared sights, sounds and experiences);
- **following the child’s lead** (heeding a child’s cues for what he or she needs).

As a child grows older, bonds with family continue to play a key role in social and emotional development. Parents and other caregivers who encourage a child to share her or his thoughts and feelings, listen attentively, and respond appropriately to the child’s needs will help that child feel more confident and secure into adolescence and beyond. Bowlby’s theory holds that children use their attachment figures, typically parents, as a “safe base.” Just as mountain climbers use a base camp to provide safety and security if trouble develops, children will use their parents as a “base camp” from which to explore their environment.



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## FACTORS THAT HELP OR HINDER PARENTS IN BUILDING A SECURE ATTACHMENT

Even though nurturing a secure attachment isn't rocket science, providing this kind of attention isn't always easy. Parents who are uninformed, under stress, or overwhelmed by too many responsibilities may not be as capable of providing the kind of attention that babies and young children require.

In order to build a secure attachment, one of the first things every parent needs is a basic knowledge and understanding of child development. Parents sometimes need help knowing what babies need—for example, that an infant's cries are a way of communicating and that ignoring those cries will increase the baby's insecurity rather than helping the baby grow strong and resilient.

In addition, all parents need support for themselves in order to care for their child. This can take the form of *instrumental support*, such as help with childcare and housework. And it also means *emotional support*—mentors to provide guidance, peers to commiserate and encourage through parenting challenges, and sometimes professionals who can provide counseling for depression, anxiety, and other difficulties many new parents experience.

Finally, as parents look to develop secure attachments with their children, they often need to spend some time examining how they themselves were cared for in childhood. According to attachment research, how parents have come to think about the way they were treated—what is called “state of mind about attachment”—is as important as the actual care they received.

## FAMILY BONDING IN NATURE

So what does shared nature experience have to do with parent-child attachment? Research hasn't yet looked specifically at a link between outdoor experience in nature and quality of parent-child attachment. And of course parents and other caregivers can be sensitive and responsive to their babies and young children indoors or out. But in many ways, the natural world seems to invite and facilitate parent-child connection and sensitive interactions.



For example, as many people note, today's homes are filled with distractions: household chores begging to be done, plus TVs, computers and telephones inviting parents to multi-task rather than focus on their baby. Unplugging from outside media and taking a child into the backyard, a park, or a nearby natural area can eliminate those distractions, making it easier for parents to be **emotionally available** to the child—one of the most important factors in building attachment.



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What's more, time in nature creates regular opportunities for **affective sharing** as you and your child ooh and aah together over nature's simple wonders—that purple flower, that enormous spider web, those bright stars.

Because the natural world is filled with sights, sounds, and smells that ignite a young child's curiosity and invite active exploration, being outdoors also can make it easy for a parent to **follow the child's lead**. When you head outdoors, respond to your child's cues and expressed interests. Share your child's delight in new discoveries and experiences. You may even find, as have so many parents before you, that getting outdoors is the best way to soothe a tired, cranky infant. Fresh air, a gentle breeze, the warmth of the sun, and the fragrance of flowers and grass can calm both a fussy baby and a frazzled parent, allowing for one of those special moments of quiet connection.



### THE HEALTH-NATURE CONNECTION

Attachment isn't the only aspect of childhood development that can be supported by time in nature. Over the last decade, researchers have discovered many fascinating connections between nature play and children's cognitive, physical, and emotional development. Time outdoors—especially unstructured time in more natural settings—can reduce children's stress, increase their curiosity and creativity, improve their physical coordination, and reduce symptoms associated with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and other conditions. Among the specific findings of recent research are these:

- kids who spend more time outside tend to be more active and are less likely to be overweight;
- kindergarteners who have regular play in natural settings have better motor fitness, especially balance and coordination, than those who play on conventional playgrounds;
- teachers observed school children to engage in more cooperative behavior and problem-solving while playing in a natural play space at school than on a more typical constructed school playground;
- kids with attention deficit hyper activity disorder (ADHD) performed better on tests after taking a short walk in a natural park setting and even closed the gap with their non ADHD peers; and
- young people who engage in regular outdoor activities are less likely to need glasses for near-sightedness than those who do not.

*“By following a prescription for more nature experience together, families will discover a win/win situation in which both children and adults benefit as individuals, even as they are strengthening those important family bonds that all children (and adults) need.”*

—Martha Farrell Erickson, developmental psychologist and founding director (emerita) of the University of Minnesota's Children, Youth, and Family Consortium and co-host of the Mom Enough™ parenting show



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## GETTING STARTED

We believe that getting outdoors with your children is a powerful way to support their development and to nurture secure parent-child attachments. But is this asking too much? Many parents already long for more quality family time, and know it is important for their children's health and development. But their jobs, children's activity schedules, and the seductive power of technology (for both kids and parents, who are often in separate rooms in front of their separate screens) make family time an elusive vision. Hearing now that they need to make sure their kids have time to play and explore outside—on top of all the other demands on their time—can feel, as one mom said recently, like, “One more ‘ought to’ that I end up feeling stressed and guilty about.”

But, what if that “one more ‘ought to’” could help parents achieve the important goal of increasing family time and building closer, stronger connections with their children? And what if that “one more thing” also could alleviate some of the stress both parents and kids experience in their often-hurried lives? We believe the natural world isn't another burden, but an ally for making every member of your family feel better *and* closer.

With that in mind, we've listed below some of our favorite nature activities for every age group, with a special emphasis on activities that are most conducive to building and maintaining secure parent-child attachments. We hope you'll use these and other ideas to discover what a boost your family can get from a regular dose of nature.

Along the way, keep in mind the following tips:

- **It's about being there, not getting there.** You may be itching to explore a long trail, but your kids may be happiest finding a place to settle down and play in the first 400 yards. Follow their lead to prolong the joy.
- **Nature is everywhere.** You can reap the benefits of time outdoors by planting seeds in a pot on your front stoop or by sketching a street tree as much as by venturing into a wild preserve.
- **Be prepared.** The Scouts have it right: to maximize the enjoyment of your time outdoors, bring along snacks, water, sunscreen, and even a change of clothes in case your kids get wet or cold.
- **Embrace the elements.** Who says you can't have a great time outdoors on a rainy or cold day? Dress right, have a silly adventure, and we bet you'll all be calmer and more contented when you come back indoors.
- **Model curiosity.** If you see plants or animals or holes or nests you can't identify—no matter! Express your curiosity and follow your kids' innate wonder. You can always look things up together when you get home.
- **Bring friends.** You can bond as a family in the company of other families; in fact, you might have even more fun!
- **Create stories.** At the end of the day, invite your kids to talk about their favorite part of your time outdoors. Revisit places you've been and retell stories of what you did. In so doing, you'll be developing your family lore and supporting the wonderful connections you've built together outdoors in nature.

*“Best five minutes I ever spent with him.”*

—Missouri father describing a time when he and his son walked in the woods and lay down on the snow beside each other for the briefest of naps.





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*“Being outside is now a priority for us. My daughter has gained confidence in herself and her abilities. I only wish we had started earlier and I hadn’t taken so long to convert.”*

–Debra Scott, longtime member of the Active Kids Club and organizer of the new Beach Club outdoor playgroup in Toronto, Canada

### Infants

**Walk the Walk.** Wander outdoors with your baby in a pack or in your arms. Vow to leave your cell phone in your pocket, ringer off, so you’re more present for your baby. Gaze around you at the sky and trees. Point out the colors, say hello to squirrels and other creatures. Listen to birds and breezes. Ooh and aah.

**Mellow Fellows.** Is your baby fussy? Take him or her outside. Sit on a swing or rock the baby under the dappled light of a tree. Take a walk in the moonlight. You might be amazed at what a good pacifier nature can be!

**The Magic Touch.** Help your baby touch wonderful pieces of nature. What does the bark of a tree feel like? Grass? Moss? Smooth pebbles? Pond water? Share these discoveries together. If your baby finds something she loves the feel of, let her linger as long as her attention holds her there.

**Natural Nursery.** The next time the weather is lovely, head outdoors for the whole of a morning or afternoon. Spread a big blanket under a tree. Bring books, snacks, and a couple of soft toys. Let your baby crawl over and on you. Watch the birds and the leafy shadows on the ground. Curl up together for a little nap. Breathe deep.



### Toddlers

**Water Bugs.** Visit a puddle, stream, pond, or beach and invite little ones to throw pebbles into the water. They’ll love collecting different sized pebbles and listening to the plinks and plunks they make in the water. Try a whole handful for a pebble symphony. Stay nearby and listen together. Don’t be surprised if your toddler can stick with this activity for a long time! Be patient and enjoy the moment.

**Nature’s Show and Tell.** Young children love collecting objects in nature. If your child finds a special treasure, crouch down and take a moment to respond and talk about it. You might even set up a table in your house to display acorns, leaves, shells, feathers, rocks, seedpods, and other natural wonders from your neighborhood and beyond.

**Dig Deep.** Has your child just discovered a great mud patch or a sweet stretch of sand? If possible, plop down and dig in! You might get out some tools, such as shovels, pots, and spoons. Or just use your hands and know you can always wash up later. Order up some sand pies or mud cookies and let your child know how “delicious” they are. Shape a house and let your child help you build and decorate it with you.



**Room to Romp.** Toddlers are often game for hearty explorations outdoors if they have the security of a parent or grandparent right nearby. Hold your little ones' hands as they clamber over fallen logs or wade through a shallow creek or chase the wind. Give them a lift through tall grasses or deep snow. Crouch close together to watch rabbits, worms, or other neighborhood wildlife. Lie side by side to count clouds or stars.

*“Over time, I’ve come to realize that a few intimate places mean more to my children, and to others, than all the glorious panoramas I could ever show them.”*

—Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Geography of Childhood*

### School-age Children

**A Green Thumbs-Up.** Ask your kids if they'd like to plant flowerpots or even a whole garden. Invite them to select the colors and the plants. They can even select a theme, such as a butterfly garden (designed to attract butterflies) or a salsa garden (complete with tomatoes or tomatillos, onions, chiles, and cilantro). Spend time together planning and planting your garden, tending it, and enjoying its fruition.



**Happy Trails.** School-age kids make great hikers, especially if you focus on having playful fun instead of covering lots of miles. Start by using your local bookstore and online sources to find appealing places to explore. Once you're there, follow your children's lead as much as possible. Maybe they want to grab a stick and make it a sword or a magic wand. Maybe they want to climb a tree. Maybe they want to build a dam across a little rivulet. You can honor their impulses even as you provide oversight. As you and your children develop confidence outdoors, allow them the freedom to roam away from you as much as feels right. An important aspect of parent-child attachment is providing a secure base from which your child begins to develop independence.

**Green Architects.** Next time you're hanging out beside a stream or even under a city tree, consider asking if anyone wants to build fairy or elf houses. Use sticks, rocks, leaves, grasses, and other natural objects to build your structures and decorate them with pebbles, sticks, flowers, and more. You can make this a shared activity by having everyone in the family construct a different room or even a separate cottage in the same mini village.

**Stick Races.** Having fun together is a wonderful way to bond, so introduce your kids to the silly fun of stick races. Begin by visiting a river or stream with a footbridge across it. Have everyone select a small stick, take them to the upstream side of the bridge, then drop the sticks into the water at the count of three. Race to the other side of the bridge and watch to see whose stick emerges first. Like pebble-throwing for toddlers, this is an activity that can consume a tremendous amount of time and attention as kids select their sticks, come up with strategies to make them faster, and cheer them on. Be ready to linger...and enjoy!



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**Night Owls.** Going on an overnight campout is a wonderful way to bond with your family. But even just taking your kids out after dark can be an exhilarating form of togetherness. Head out into the yard, a nearby thicket, or even just your neighborhood streets. Kids love carrying flashlights to light their paths and help spot animals. After a while, choose one place to hunker down, lights off. Huddle in close together. Gaze at the stars. Listen to the night noises around you. The nighttime world has a way of drawing people extra close.

**Holding up the Fort.** Help your kids gather branches, tarps, rope, and other materials to make their own hideouts in nature. Maybe they want to build a platform in a tree, a bird blind in the woods, or a secret fort beside a nearby arroyo. Play as much or as little of a role as they need to build their structures.

### Teenagers

**Field Trips.** Explore new ground with your teens, following their interests. Consider birding, fishing, kayaking or canoeing, or hiking together. Do your children express different interests? Consider having just one parent and one child head out together to encourage new lines of connection and communication, including that sweet shared silence that can be an important part of parent-child attachment.

**Lend a Hand.** A nature-related service project is a great way to support your community *and* build family togetherness. You can do something as simple as picking up trash on your block or in one of your favorite natural areas (all you need are gloves and a trash bag). Or join a group working on a bigger project, such as planting trees, creating a city garden, clearing invasive plants, or constructing bird boxes.



**Pack Rats.** There's nothing like a backpacking trip to give parents and children new ways to connect, and to give a teenager a healthy challenge for mind and body. If you're new to backpacking, you and your teen might want to spend extra time selecting a good destination and route. You might even want to join forces with one or more families, or an organization like the Sierra Club that organizes family trips for you, to ensure that your first trip goes as smoothly as possible. Then again, even wet tents and fires that fail to light can contribute to great family bonds.

**iGoOutdoors.** If your teenagers are wild about electronic devices, consider finding ways to make those devices part of your explorations in nature. For example, would your teens be interested in creating a portfolio of nature photography? Or producing an outdoor film with you? Maybe they could put up posts on Facebook or start a blog documenting some of the things your family does in nature. Allow your teens to become the authors and co-directors of your outdoor experiences. Who knows, they might even inspire more teens to come along for the ride.



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## Frequently Asked Questions

*Every time I try to get my kids to go for a hike, they groan. Should I force them outside?*

Even kids who love spending time outdoors may occasionally complain about it. Try emphasizing play and adventure instead of hiking (i.e., “Who wants to go goof around at a creek? Who’s ready for a wild rumpus?!”). Convey your own enthusiasm, which is generally infectious, instead of making this sound like a chore. And if your kids really need a different kind of day, honor that too. Nature is like good food—your job is to provide great options, not to force it down.

*I live in the city. How can I spend regular quality time in nature with my kids?*

Even urban areas provide innumerable opportunities for nature play. Visit a playground and explore the wilder margins instead of the groomed structures. Find a community garden or a vacant lot in which to dig. Do a little research and you may find really amazing green places just a short walk or bus trip away.

*I think my family has visited every green place in our area. Now what?*

Go back! One of the best parts of spending time in nature is becoming attuned to the ways a place changes depending on the time of day, weather, season, or just your own luck. You can even create incentives for multiple visits; for example, have your kids keep a nature journal with regular entries about the same place. Or have them name a tree after themselves and then go back to visit it. Or hide a treasure and go back to see if anyone has found it!

*I love the idea of taking my kids onto nature trails, but I’m a little afraid. What if something goes wrong and I’m stuck out there by myself?*

Consider joining or starting a family nature club—a group of families that organizes regular outings together. You’ll feel safer, and you and your kids will probably love the chance to bond with peers as well as each other. (For more on family nature clubs, see the Resources section.)

*I’m a grandparent. Can time in nature help me build good attachments with my grandchildren?*

Absolutely. In many families, grandparents are very important attachment figures for children, adding to a child’s developing sense of security and confidence. So grandparents will reap the same benefits a parent will from getting outdoors with the children in their care. What’s more, many adults say that the time they spent in childhood outdoors with grandparents and other older relatives was the most important contributor to their lifelong connection to nature.

*“Families bond together as they play, talk, and learn in nature. They experience nature walks as an opportunity to grow together. When they discover a new bug or wildflower, they experience a sense of wonder and make memories together on the trail.”*

—Laurel Dodge, co-founder, Nature Strollers family nature club



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## RESOURCES

### Background Reading

Read in-depth accounts of the benefits of connecting kids to nature in Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2005). For more on the benefits of nature for adults and families, read Richard Louv's *The Nature Principle* (Algonquin Books, 2011).

Read more about the latest research on the connections between time in nature and children's health in C&NN's annotated bibliography, "Health Benefits to Children from Contact with The Outdoors & Nature," available at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/research/>.

Find resources for pediatricians on the benefits to children of time in nature in "Grow Outside" at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/pediatricians/>.

For a deeper understanding of attachment, read Dr. Martha Farrell Erickson's reader-friendly and short "frequently asked questions" and answers on the C&NN web site at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/AttachmentFAQME.pdf> and *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love* by Robert Karen (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Learn more about parent-child attachment and other related child development topics in weekly parenting shows, hosted by Dr. Marti Erickson and her daughter Erin, and printed resources available free of charge at [www.MomEnough.com](http://www.MomEnough.com).

## ACTIVITIES

Find out more about family nature clubs, including a listing of existing groups around the world and a toolkit for starting your own nature club, at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/movement/naturalfamilies/clubs>.

Get more ideas for spending time in nature with your family, and locate great nearby nature, by visiting Nature Rocks at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/movement/naturerocks/>.

Find activities and stories that are ideal for family time in nature in "Where Nature Meets Story" at <http://www.childrenandnature.org/naturestory/>.

Check out the Sierra Club's annual listing of family wilderness trips, including base camp options, at <http://www.sierraclub.org/outings/>.



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## About the Children & Nature Network

The Children & Nature Network (C&NN) is leading a movement to connect all children, their families and communities to nature through innovative ideas, evidence-based resources and tools, broad-based collaboration and support of grassroots leadership. C&NN is the only organization focused solely on building a national and international movement that reconnects children with nature to optimize their healthy development—cognitively, emotionally, socially and physically. C&NN builds awareness, provides access to state-of-the art resources, supports the grassroots with tools and strategies, develops publications and educational materials, synthesizes the best available research, and encourages collaboration to heal the broken bond between children and nature. C&NN is a 501c3 non-profit organization. For additional information, visit [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org) and contact us at [info@childrenandnature.org](mailto:info@childrenandnature.org).

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