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SIMPLE WAYS TO EXPAND TIME AND SPACE FOR KIDS AND ADULTS

Many of us hunger for unscheduled free time in nature, with good reason. Research shows that when children play in natural spaces, they're far more likely to invent their own games than in more structured settings—a key factor in becoming self-directed and inventive as children and later in life. In fact, creativity and learning throughout life can be stimulated by more time in nature. But here's the paradox: To make time for unorganized time in nature, a busy family is probably going to have to organize a lot of it. Doing that with a sense of proportion and humor helps.

Put nature on the calendar.

If you plan the family's sports commitments and vacations in advance, do the same for time spent in nature. Try skipping organized sports for a season and use that time to get outside. That suggestion won't work for everyone, but for busy families, taking time for nature requires *taking* time—and putting it on the calendar.

Practice “friluftsliv.”

“Friluftsliv” is a Norwegian term, introduced in 1859, that roughly translates as “free air life.” It's a general lifestyle idea that promotes outdoor activity as good for all aspects of human health. The protocol is pretty straightforward—just be outside as much as possible. Work it into your schedule by committing to being in nature for a minimum amount of time every day, or a certain number of days a month.

Think of nature time as enrichment time.

Leisure is good. Of course! Play is essential. But our culture tends to dismiss independent play, leisure, and nature time as nonessential nice-to-haves. But in terms of child development, or human development at any age, nature time is as important as activities we now consider educational or developmental enrichment.

Turn your commute time into a nature safari.

If you're stuck in traffic, entertain yourself and your kids by keeping an eye out for plants, animals, or other natural curiosities on the side of the road. If you see something really intriguing, pull over and take a look. "We've pulled over more times than I can count because one of us spotted something worth watching. Cool cloud formations, gorgeous sunsets and make-you-smile rainbows. And the birds—oh, the birds—they never disappoint!" says one mother.

Take a First Day Hike.

New to hiking? No problem. State parks, many of them in urban areas or close by, offer hundreds of guided First Day Hikes (referring to the first day of January), to individuals and families with kids eight years old or older. For more information about the First Day Hike program, go to AmericanHiking.org.

Walk this way.

On their first hike, younger children can enjoy playing a game called "walk this way" — imitating different animals along the way. Bring toys and props that will make it more fun, like hats and fake swords. Walkie-talkies are also a big hit. Encourage kids to take turns as "hike leader," walking in front and setting the pace. To help kids pay attention during longer hikes, play find ten critters—which means discovering footprints or other signs of an animal passing through. Recommended book: *The Down and Dirty Guide to Camping with Kids*.

Go on a moon walk.

Take a family walk when the moon is full. Cindy Ross is a longtime devotee of full-moon walks. "We've walked by balmy summer moons in T-shirts, with katydids singing and lightning bugs flashing in a multi-sensory display." But the best moon walks, she says, are under the winter moons. "I started out going on full moon walks for myself . . . but I also did it for my children, so they would grow up to realize there is much magic in the natural world and most of it is free." Bring a flashlight, of course, but it's important to turn it off sometimes and let your senses emerge and adjust. Listen for animal sounds (a whole new crew is out at night), watch for the silhouettes of owls and bats looking for prey, and keep your eye out for life that glows, including glow worms and fungus on trees.

Set a star date.

If your family is lucky enough to live where the stars are visible, stargaze in the evening or very early morning. In the yard, from a balcony, or out beyond the city lights, take a blanket, binoculars, or small telescope, and stargaze together. With your kids, locate a few key constellations and orient to those. Air and light pollution prevent two-thirds of the U.S. population and more than half of Europe's population from seeing the Milky Way with the naked eye. Schools, sky-watcher groups, amateur meteorologists, and even star charts in our smartphones can help. Good resources include For Spacious Skies, a sky-awareness program, and Dark Sky Initiative, which works to preserve and protect the nighttime environment.

Lose the cell phone; get a better connection.

Tech isn't the enemy, but it can certainly be a barrier. Vow to leave your cell phone in your pocket, ringer off, as well as all the beeps, tweets, and repeats, so you're more present to your child. Limit access to texting, computers, and TV part of the day or week. For example, schedule Saturday as a "Smartphone and iPad-Free Outdoor Play Day" for the kids and the parents as well (more about that later).

Play hooky.

That's right. Hooky, preferably with the teacher's permission. In his book, *Home Grown: Adventures in Parenting off the Beaten Path*, Ben Hewitt suggests that parents of school-aged children "take them out of school for a day." And take the day off work yourself. He suggests unplugging all screens at home and, for at least part of the day, heading for the woods, a park, the middle of a hayfield, with no agenda.

GIVE THE GIFTS OF NATURE AND CREATE NEW FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP RITUALS

This holiday season, give a partridge in a pear tree. If you can't find a partridge or a pear tree, here are a few suggestions for natural gifts for any occasion. Some of these can inspire direct experience. Others can *be* the experience. All of them can last for decades.

Make an outdoor coupon book.

Give your child, other family member, or friend an envelope with several coupons for day hikes, fishing trips, tree climbing, stargazing, wild watching, a mound of dirt (cheaper than a video game), or any of the gifts below. These coupons can be redeemed during the holidays or throughout the year.

Hold a holiday or family celebration outdoors.

Bring your next birthday, anniversary, or family reunion into nature. Kathy Ambrosini, an environmental educator in New York, suggests this holiday approach: "Change it up this Thanksgiving! Invite family to come early for a pre-feast walk. Those who stay overnight can join you for a walk at a neighborhood preserve in the morning." Do it twice, and make it a new family tradition. Need an alternative site? Some nature centers offer indoor and outdoor spaces for special events.

Create a gardening gift basket.

Assemble seeds for native plants, trowels, kneepads, and other gardening tools, and plant a traditional vegetable or flower garden. Or, go native. Include a guide to local native plants and animals (or download and assemble your own guide from online resources). Add a journal to record the progress of the garden, and, if you go native, to record the native insects and other critters that show up to rebuild the food web.

Put together a family G.O. Bag.

Stuff a duffel bag with daypacks, a compass, binoculars, nature guides, and maybe a topo-map of your bioregion. Add granola bars, hats, gloves, fleece vests, sunglasses, collapsible hiking poles, some old hiking shoes or other comfortable footwear, and water bottles. Wrap your G.O. Bag. Stash it in your car trunk. Now your family can Go Outside on a moment's notice.

Create natural decorations for holidays and birthdays.

Create holiday ornaments or cards from sticks, rocks, and leaves. For a wreath, bend a wire hanger into a circle. As suggested in *The Kids' Outdoor Adventure Book*, gather evergreen branches and wrap them around the hanger, securing with twine. Collect other natural materials from the yard or nearby nature to decorate it. Add some berries and a bow. Now take a bow.

Give a book that will inspire an outdoor adventure.

Most of us can recall our favorite childhood books: picture books, books for early and middle readers, and for young adults. As gift books, the ones that parents and other family members loved when they were children will have special meaning for kids. The books most likely to inspire children to head outdoors aren't environmental sermons (plenty of time for those later), but about adventure and wonder. Such inspirational titles include *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Jungle Book*, and *The Curious Garden*. And don't forget adult family members and friends; inspire them with Robert Michael Pyle's *The Thunder Tree*, Jon Young's *What the Robin Knows*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and Rachel Carson's *The Sense of Wonder*.

Make the “green hour” a new family tradition.

The National Wildlife Federation recommends that parents give their kids a daily green hour for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world. Can't spare a green hour? Fifteen minutes is a good start. “Imagine a map with your home in the center. Draw ever-widening circles around it, each representing a successively older child's realm of experience,” NWF suggests. “Whenever possible, encourage some independent exploration as your child develops new skills and greater confidence.”

Take a vacation or staycation at a state or national park.

Participate in one of the family or group outing programs offered by local and state parks, such as Connecticut's Great Park Pursuit. Some programs offer fishing lessons, hiking events, and geocaching treasure hunts. Around the country, national and state parks may seem overcrowded, but that crush is mainly on the roads. The vast number of visitors to national and state parks never venture farther than a few yards from their cars.

Purchase a family park pass.

National parks, national monuments, and some refuges and regional parks exist in urban as well as wilderness areas. Many parks charge for admission, but as *Forbes* magazine points out, they aren't a bad deal when compared to other forms of recreation: “Going to a movie for a family of four can cost around \$80. Bowling for four for two hours on a Saturday can cost around \$90, not including food.” In comparison, an unlimited annual family pass to the national parks costs \$80; it's free for members of the military and those with permanent disabilities. (Beginning in September 2015, all fourth graders in the United States—and their families— became eligible for a free annual pass to the national parks and other federal natural lands.)

Plant a family or friendship tree, or adopt one.

Adopt or plant a tree to help mark important family occasions—a holiday, a birth, death, or marriage. The Arbor Day Foundation has information about tree-planting opportunities. Susan J. Tweit, plant biologist and author of *Walking Nature Home*, offers this suggestion: “Get to know a tree or shrub in your neighborhood intimately by observing it over the course of a growing season. Every week, check your adopted tree or shrub and note any changes.” The Take a Child Outside Week campaign suggests taking pictures of your live family tree in its first snow or after a big windstorm. Make bark rubbings using crayons and paper. Make a digital adoption notebook with photos, videos, and observations. Plant its seeds. If the tree dies, save some leaves or branches as remembrances. “If you share your observations, you'll be giving scientists useful data to track climate change,” she says. To get started, visit Project Budburst or Nature's Notebook, and set up an account for your adopted tree or shrub.

Build memories, but don't expect immediate results.

Especially for older children and teenagers, shared outdoor experiences encourage indirect communication — rather than the kind of in-your-face parental quizzes they dread. Even if the payoff isn't immediately visible, wait for it. When reminiscing with their families about childhood memories, grown children seldom mention the best day they spent watching TV or playing a video game. Among the memories they do recall, if they're lucky enough to have had such experiences with their families, are outdoor adventures—even if they complained loudly about such outings at the time.

Give the gift of radical amazement.

The great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. Birthdays and holidays are an especially good time to remind ourselves that this is so. As Heschel advised, take nothing for granted: "Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." Along with sharing time, radical amazement is the best present you can offer, best delivered by example. And you don't even have to wrap it.

MAKE ROOM FOR INDEPENDENT PLAY AND SOLITUDE

While it's essential to put nature on the calendar, parents and other guardians also need to know when to unschedule. Tamra Willis, associate professor in the College of Education at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, suggests parents be aware of the tension between independent and structured play. But rather than feeling compelled to choose between guided or independent play, consider play a spectrum of activities. There's a time to guide. There's a time to share the experience together. There's a time to step back. And there's a time for solitude.

Recognize that boredom isn't necessarily a negative.

Especially during summer, parents hear the moaning complaint: "I'm borrrred." Boredom is fear's dull cousin. Passive, full of excuses, it can keep children from nature — or drive them to it. Many of us recall how carefully planned activities paled in comparison to more spontaneous experiences, and that boredom often pushed us to create our own stories, which we tell to this day.

Be the guide on the side.

“Parents should encourage children to explore by asking questions and helping them find answers,” says Willis. “There are other times when a parent or teacher should be the ‘guide on the side.’” Environmental educator Joe Baust agrees and suggests the next step on the spectrum: “Don’t be the sage on the stage, set the stage”—a setting for more independent play, with less or no adult supervision or instruction.

Inspire curiosity by example, and accept that you don’t have to know everything.

At times, the parent should lead the way, and actively teach, but other times parents should encourage the child to be the guide—the outdoor leader of adults or other kids. Step back. You don’t have to be a Master Naturalist to know which way the wind blows. Sometimes just introducing a child to the wind is magic enough. You may even discover that you haven’t listened—really listened—to the wind in years. Excitement is contagious. Be a new learner, along with your child—be open to new things. Encourage questions to which you don’t know the answer: “I don’t know! Let’s find out together.” Recommended book: *The Nature Connection: An Outdoor Workbook for Kids, Families, and Classrooms*.

To encourage independent play, meet up with other families and friends.

This may seem counterintuitive, but one way that parents can encourage kids to play in unstructured ways is to join other families outdoors. Doing so makes it easier for parents to feel comfortable standing back and letting the kids play on their own. Children are more likely to forget the electronics waiting at home and join with other kids in spontaneous play.

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