



family nature play & you

eGuide for families

INSIDE
get outside!

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Acknowledgements





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“Accredited zoos and aquariums are where nature play begins for many families, particularly in our increasingly urban world. As conservation organizations, part of our mission is to create experiences that cultivate environmental stewards and foster a connection to wildlife and nature. We hope these resources make it easier for more aquariums and zoos to become leaders in their communities for the nature play movement.”

— Jackie Ogden, Ph.D., Vice President, Animals, Science and Environment, Walt Disney Parks and Resorts



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family nature play & you

Value of Nature Play

Why do we call it “The Great Outdoors”? There are vast and virtually endless opportunities to see, explore, learn from, and be inspired by the wonders of our natural world. Nature is more than plants, animals, air, earth, and water; it is an important part of who we are as humans. **Evidence** strongly indicates that spending time in nature benefits physical and mental health and our overall well-being. It is especially important for children to have frequent and varied opportunities for play outdoors in nature as a healthy and fun part of their everyday lives. Unstructured nature play is spontaneous and self-directed. It allows children to become self-reliant, make independent observations and decisions, explore interests, solve problems, discover talents, and form their individual identities.



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Use this eGuide as inspiration and a platform for getting outside with your family — and let your kids lead the way! This guide will give you ideas for why, how, where, and when to connect to nature and let your kids play in the great outdoors...

5 Reasons

to Connect Your Family to Nature



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Happier

1

Nature play increases self-esteem, improves psychological health and reduces stress. Children learn self-discipline and are more cooperative. View pictures and read the research to **learn more**.

Healthier

2

Supporting that which seems innately intuitive, research indicates that kids who spend more time outside tend to be **more active** and are less likely to be overweight, among **other benefits**, including reduced anxiety, and **lowered symptoms of ADHD**.

Smarter

3

Kids who spend time in natural settings tend to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers. They do better in school and develop **executive function**, such as remembering details, planning, organizing, and focusing, more readily than children who only spend time on manufactured playgrounds or have no free play outdoors at all. Additionally, kids whose time is less structured are better able to reach their own goals.

Better Bonding

4

Most families yearn for quality time together. Spending time in nature with your children—whether at an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium, in a local park, on a trail, or up in a tree in your own backyard—is an ideal way to nurture family and social bonds.

5 Reasons

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More Creative

When kids spend time outdoors in unstructured play, they are more inclined to invent games and engage in imaginative play. They explore with their senses, create new ideas, and learn to negotiate with peers to find creative solutions to challenges.

Find more **creative ideas** for family nature play activities, or attend a nature play program or event at an **AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium**.

5



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For more information on family bonding in nature and attachment theory, see ***Shared Nature Experience as a Pathway to Strong Family Bonds*** by Martha Farrell Erickson, PhD.

5 Ways

to Connect Your Family to Nature

An opportunity for family bonding, learning, and fun begins with every trip to an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium. A trip to the zoo or the aquarium also represents a nature experience for many families. It is a means of connecting with animals and the natural world while in a familiar and safe environment. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are gateways through which millions of people learn about and value the rich diversity of life that is humankind's wildlife heritage. Try one of these activities, coupled with plenty of **unstructured time to play!**

Start at your zoo or aquarium

Your local **AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium** provides a great place to begin a nature connection. Many of these venues offer self-directed exploration in nature play zones and family nature play programming where imaginations can run wild. Zoos and aquariums are wonderful places to surround your family with nature and watch the smiles spread. Take your family to an AZA-accredited institution for a healthy dose of nature play!

1

Explore your own outdoor space

Sometimes creating an **adventure in your own backyard** is the best place to start. Don't forget to look under pots and rocks! Encourage things like sketching, observing and keeping a wildlife journal. If your yard, or outdoor area, is carefully landscaped, you can temporarily **introduce nature objects** like pine cones and branches, or bring out repurposed items like boxes and old pots and pans for fort building and pretend play.

2

Live on the edge

Be aware of your surroundings and push the boundaries when appropriate. **Risky play** is an important component of childhood. Nature play helps children calculate risks and promotes safe decision-making. Invite your kids to safely explore the rocks, trees, sticks and shrubs at the perimeter of parks, ball fields, buildings and open spaces. Observe the birds and other wildlife that inhabit the edges, too. How many different types of animals can you find? How are they spending their time "on the edge"?

3



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5 Ways

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Go on an urban safari

4

Nature is all around us — including ‘big nature’ like rain, clouds and sunshine! Start in your neighborhood or at a local nature trail. From the biggest tree or shrub to the smallest plant in the crack of the sidewalk, what can you find in your nearby nature? Try this easy tip sheet for creating your own **scavenger hunt** for any location or season. Keep your hikers happy while on the trail with these **fun ideas**.



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Try camping out

5

Check with your local **AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium** to see if they offer overnight experiences. Even your own spaces at home can provide a camping adventure that will provide memories to last a lifetime. Not sure where to start? Check out this **camping checklist** by REI.



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Start or join a Family Nature Club! These friendly groups can help to ensure a regular connection to the outdoors and nature play. They also help address many of the most common barriers to getting outdoors. **Learn more** about AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums that have Family Nature Club programming.

5 Places

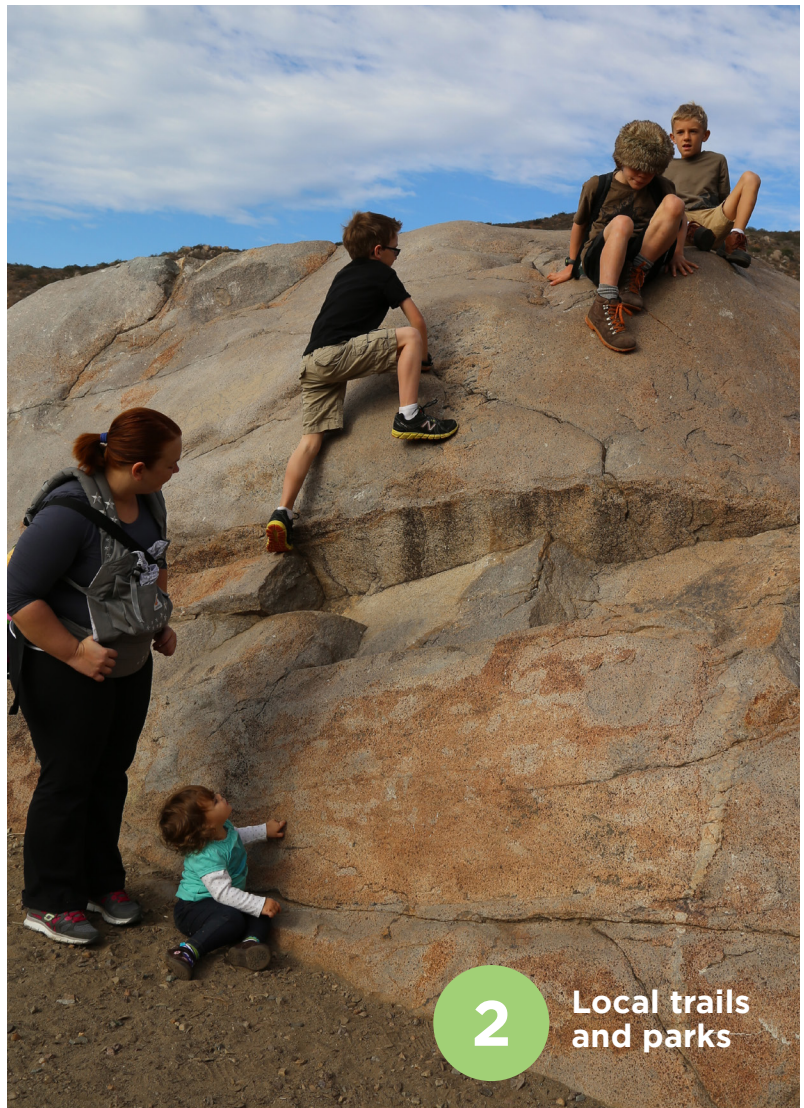
to Connect Your Family to Nature

Nature play begins at your AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium

You don't have to travel hundreds of miles to get connected to nature. Start where you are most comfortable, close to home or at a local park, zoo or aquarium. When you are ready, reach farther out into your "nearby nature".

AZA accredited zoos and aquariums have a tremendous ability to connect people with animals and to nature. They are places that enable nature play experiences and foster a conservation ethic that begins through a child's self led discovery and is reinforced by shared experiences as a

family. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums recognizes the important role that zoos and aquariums play in the movement to connect families to nature and invites you and your family to use your local AZA-accredited facility as a bridge to more frequent and more extensive nature play.



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5 Places

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3

Zoos, Aquariums,
and Nature Centers



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4

Local water
spaces



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5

State and
national parks

5 Times

to Connect Your Family to Nature



What are your memories of playing as a child? Many adults recall going inside only for meals or once the street lights came on. Outdoor free time has been increasingly diminished and replaced with structured activities and electronic media. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that kids spend an average of **seven hours a day on entertainment media**.

In the 2011 issue of *The American Journal of Play*, Richard Louv and Cherly Charles were interviewed on the importance of **Battling Nature Deficit With Nature Play**. Learn about the definition of **nature deficit disorder**, in the book that started

it all, with an in depth account of why and how to connect children and nature, ***Last Child in the Woods*** by Richard Louv.

When school is out

Take advantage of non-school time to let your kids unplug and unwind in nature. Many AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums offer classes, camps, and special events that focus on nature themes and incorporate opportunities for outside play time. You might even catch the animals playing during your visit!

1

5 Times

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2

Regular family routines

Given everyone's hectic schedules, it is important to schedule time in nature together. Some families enjoy a regular evening walk before or after dinner. Others might enjoy a weekly or monthly outing to a favorite nature place. Family Nature Clubs can help make nature play a priority.

3

Holidays and family celebrations

During holidays and family celebrations, from birthdays to Thanksgiving to Diwali to New Year, make nature a regular part of your family celebrations. Remember that you don't have to wait for a big vacation to celebrate in nature!

4

With extended family

From a regular visit to grandma's to the annual family reunion to a gathering of friends that feel like family, don't forget to include some time in nature in addition to your regularly scheduled events. It will help everyone stay connected, relaxed and focused on being together.

5

In wild weather

A little rain, wind, or snow should not always hold you back from going outside. Use your own discretion, bundle up the kids, feel the wind on your face, splash in the puddles or make snow angels. Mud washes off clothes (and kids!).

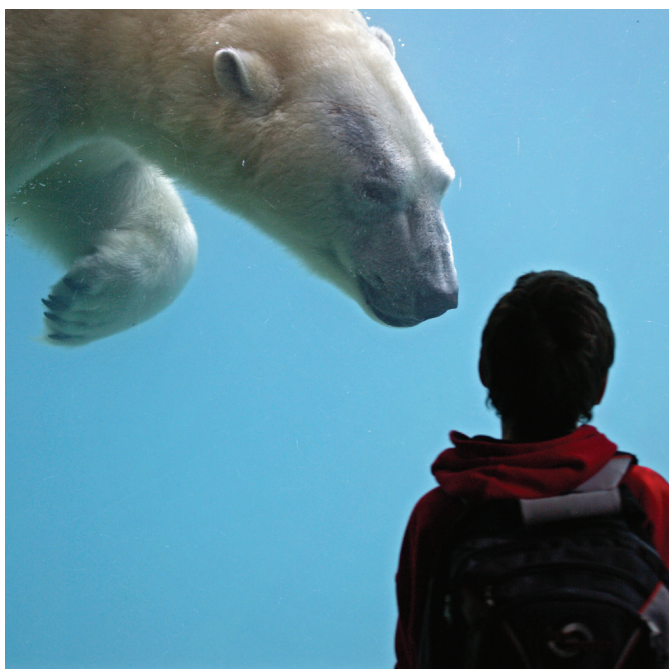
Additional Tools & Resources

From the Association of Zoos & Aquariums

Things to Do: Play like an animal, cloud/star gaze, go for a walk, animal yoga, go for a picnic, and more!

Places to Go: AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, nature clubs and events, parks and trails, and more.

Share and Connect: Had a fun nature adventure? We want to hear about it! #NaturePlay @Zoos_Aquariums



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additional tools

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From the Children & Nature Network

This guide was created in partnership with the Children & Nature Network. The **Children & Nature Network** is building the 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. Together we are creating a world in which every child can play, learn and grow in nature.

Visit the Children & Nature Network to locate tools and resources, connect to others and find your path in the movement to connect children and nature.



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A Parent's Guide to Nature Play is another free resource, chock-full of reasons why and how to get your kids into nature (starting in your own backyard). You can carry *Nature Circles* with you for tips on the go!

nature play resources

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Find More Places to Go and Things to Do (click on the links)

[5 Important Elements to Include in Your Natural Outdoor Play Space](#)

[10 Ways to Backyard Adventure](#)

[A Parent's Guide to Nature Play](#)

[AZA: Find a Zoo or Aquarium](#)

[Battling the Nature Deficit with Nature Play](#)

[Camping Checklist](#)

[Children & Nature Network](#)

[COVID-19](#)

[Ecopsychology: How Immersion in Nature Benefits Your Health](#)

[Executive Function & Self-Regulation](#)

[Family Nature Club Toolkit](#)

[Five Key Elements to Creating a Natural Play Space for Children](#)

[How to Make Hiking Fun with Kids](#)

[How to Make Your Own Nature Scavenger Hunt](#)

[Nature Circles Guides](#)

[Nature Play at Home](#)

[Nature Play Can Encourage Care for the Earth](#)

[Risky Play: Why Children Love It and Need It](#)

[Screen Time vs. Lean Time](#)

[Shared Nature Experience as a Pathway to Strong Family Bonds](#)

[Spend Time Outside to Improve ADHD Symptoms](#)

[The Incomparable Benefits of Unstructured Play](#)

[The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children](#)

[What is Nature-Deficit Disorder?](#)

[Youth and Family Engagement](#)



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