

Nurturing a Nature Kid: Opportunities for Nature Time

It's easy for me to say that we need more nature kids. I was one as I was growing up, so I can see all the joys, wonderful times, and great friendships that came with my attachment to nature. And children can be sports kids *and* nature kids, or any combination of passions and interests. If part of them is a nature kid, it's a great thing for them and for the rest of the planet.

Nature kids – those are the kids who are drawn to animals or plants and want to understand them or maybe go looking for them out in their natural habitat. With a little experience and guidance, they seem at home in creeks, fields, and woods, and are happy to spend lots of time there. A few of them give the impression that they were born at the creek or their first language was the speech of crows, but they probably became nature kids from some combination of opportunities to be out in nature, experiences of wonder and joy when outside, and the encouragement of trusted adults.

Several good things may happen for kids who love nature and spend time in it. One is the physical activity that being in the field involves. A 2022 “report card” on the physical activity of U.S. children graded kids from six to seventeen a “D-minus” in overall physical activity¹. Walking the trails, wading the creek, and climbing trees would help with that.

Nature kids may also see benefits to their mood and level of stress. The Children and Nature Network tells us that such children may have reduced anxiety, greater resilience, and perhaps fewer symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder². This mirrors what has been found when researchers looked at how nature affects adults, too. Lower stress hormones, less anxiety, lower blood pressure, and better reports of well-being are often seen when any of us spends time in nature.³

¹ Physical Activity Alliance. The 2022 United States Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. <https://www.activehealthykids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/US-report-card-short-form-2022.pdf> (accessed 9/5/25)

² Children and Nature Network. Kids Need to be Outside. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/the-benefits-of-nature/> (accessed 9/5/25)

³ Williams. F. 2017. The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative. NY: W.W. Norton & Co.



Remember when we talked about Elijah at the creek? He's picking up bits of information about biology, geology, and paleontology, with no classes or quizzes. Just being out there and noticing what is around him increases what he knows about how fish swim and how aquatic creatures breathe underwater. And from our walks together, he recognizes several native plants and maybe a spider or two, and of course those prehistoric ammonites. All of that may link together some concepts he learns in biology and make them seem more relevant. And so, being a nature kid might benefit a child's education.

Do you have a child, or maybe know a child, who could be a nature kid? Let's talk about how a love of nature comes about and how you can encourage and support it. I mentioned three things that are probably involved: opportunities to be in nature, positive experiences, and supportive adults. There is at least one additional factor that provides some power to these other things, coming from who we are as a species.



Kayla, her daughters Griffyn and Mavyn, and Elijah on a spring walk



The biophilia hypothesis says that we are genetically built to be attracted to nature and living things. This idea was developed by biologist E.O. Wilson⁴, arguing that as our species evolved, paying attention to animals, flowers, trees, bodies of water, and other things in nature gave us an adaptive advantage. After all, we depended on some animals for food and needed to avoid other animals in order to survive. Flowers are associated with nourishing fruits. Water is necessary for life, and certain land forms are better at offering shelter, lookout points, and so on. Wilson and others would say that being drawn to living things is still part of our genetic inheritance. Like other traits, this one is strongly expressed in some people and stays in the background in others.

If your child likes being immersed in nature, you could tell them, “It’s a family tradition, part of the whole human family going back way before everyone’s grandparents.”

Even if it is a family tradition, without certain experiences and opportunities it may be completely unrealized. Much of our society is disconnected from nature, partly because the way we live tends to concentrate us in big cities, surrounded by the built world of buildings, streets, cars, and so on. And our daily lives have less and less to do with nature. Does food really grow out of the ground? If you walk on a path under those trees, will a bear get you? These are questions that some urban kids might actually wonder about. And they learn that everything good happens in the built world, courtesy of technology. It makes you wonder if biophilia has been buried under concrete, bricks, and high-speed internet.

A recent study of kids in the U.S. and several Western countries found that they are spending more and more time on screens – smartphones, tablets, computers, game consoles, TV, etc. – for entertainment, homework, and messaging friends. Increased screen time was associated with increased emotional and behavioral problems, and with increases in those problems the kids were more likely to use screens to cope⁵. (The association between those things does not prove that one of them caused the other but suggests that screens could be contributing to the problems.) The American College of Pediatricians lists a variety of problems associated with excessive screen time. They reported on kids’ use of screens, saying that tweens’ and teens’ viewing of online videos has more than doubled over a four-year period⁶.

⁴ Wilson, E.O. 1984. *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁵ American Psychological Association. Screen time and emotional problems in kids: A vicious circle?
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2025/06/screen-time-problems-children> (accessed 9/6/25)

⁶ American College of Pediatricians. Media Use And Screen Time – Its Impact On Children, Adolescents, And Families.
<https://acped.org/media-use-and-families/d-screen-time-its-impact-on-children-adolescents-> (accessed 9/6/25)



The effort to get kids back into nature got a big boost with the 2008 publication of Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*⁷. He coined the term "nature deficit disorder," not literally as a diagnosis but as a way of expressing that kids are missing out on important experiences, and they will be worse off for lack of nature contact. The book has influenced many parents and teachers and helped launch an organization, the Children and Nature Network, dedicated to re-connecting children with nature.

Don't assume that this re-connection happens in yearly vacations to exotic places. The beginning of my lifelong interest in reptiles and amphibians was sparked at ten years old by exploring fields, ditches, and vacant lots in a suburb of Denver. The place that became home away from home in my preteen and teenage years was a creek at the western edge of Fort Worth. The more I visited, the more I discovered and as a result I was pulled deeply into that creek. There's nothing wrong with memorable visits to truly wild places, but I think the way nature becomes part of you is when you have a nearby place, or a few places, that you visit regularly.

I talked about some of these ideas with Michael Perez, Natural Scientist Supervisor at the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge (FWNCR). Michael emphasized how support and guidance in nature can lead to empowerment, and he recalled a wonderful example. The FWNCR has a program offering overnight camping and canoeing for inner city kids. As one group got off the bus, Michael noticed the cool kids hanging together, but then there was this other one who stepped down from the bus last. It was clear from the first moment that this guy didn't really fit; wasn't really accepted in his group.

And then the kids were paired up with each other in the canoes and set off under Michael's guidance. One of those cool kids, in the canoe with the guy who didn't fit, suddenly shrank back.

"There's a spider! A spider, Mr. Michael, in the canoe!" He was seriously frightened.

But the misfit tried to reassure him: "It's OK, it's all right." He cupped his hands and gently caught the big spider and moved it to some passing vegetation outside the canoe. Then someone else discovered a spider, so the "spider whisperer's" canoe made its way over to the other one. Once again, he gently and fearlessly captured the spider and relocated it.

And now, no longer the rejected kid, this boy was at the center of the group. When there was a strange sound during camping that night, he was the one the other boys came to for understanding and

⁷ Louv, R. 2008. *Last Child in the Woods*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill



reassurance that it was OK. And so, a nature setting allowed this boy's strengths to come forward and be recognized. He was, in this context, fearless and capable, and it made a real difference. Nature was, as Michael said, empowering.

What Do Grown Up Nature Kids Say?

I was curious about how a love of nature develops. Carl is a friend who heads up a Texas turtle research nonprofit. He is a guy who is used to speaking the language of facts and science, but on this issue he spoke of emotion. "I think that it could be traced back to a point in childhood when you experienced unfettered, unadulterated joy" when out somewhere in nature. I think so, too. There may be one experience that stands out in memory as a turning point toward nature, but I doubt that it develops in a life-changing flash. Instead, my bet is that it all adds up, those moments of amazement, the walks that felt joyous and carefree, the wonder of seeing something so beautiful or strange, and one day we notice that nature is something that feels like home. When I talk with adults who loved nature as kids, their stories include opportunities to explore, experiences of joy and wonder, and some level of support from grown-ups.

Jenna

Jenna is a great advocate for snakes, though she retains some of her childhood fear of spiders. Her mom was afraid of both and passed those fears along to her young daughter. A parent's reactions of fear and disgust, as well as their warnings and stories, are powerful teachers for their kids. But a child's curiosity and independence are also powerful, and fears can be unlearned.

"Reptiles struck a chord with me when I was really little and caught one." Jenna told me that she feared snakes until she held one. She recalls thinking to herself, "Well, you're not scary; you're not even trying to bite me." The fear fell away and she took delight in finding and catching things.

At age five, she caught a Texas spiny lizard. "I don't know how," she remarked, "they're not slow." They're also fairly large and their scales pretty spiny. And so, "My mom freaked out, and my dad was like, 'oh, that's cool.' That's how it started." Jenna kept finding animals, and eventually her mom would not freak out, just tell her to put it outside. "Now she holds my bearded dragon," Jenna said proudly. "She's come a long way."



Since coming to love and appreciate reptiles, she has tried to help others lose their fear. She tells them, "Hey look, it's different but not scary – it's not dangerous." Jenna understands her advocacy this way: "I grew up being the weird kid, so I see a little bit of myself in reptiles. Because people don't understand them, they're scared of them and they treat them poorly, and people do that to people they don't understand. So they (reptiles) resonate with me."

Despite her mom's fears, the support of her parents undoubtedly strengthened Jenna's love of nature. She recalled, "I would see something and say 'woah, are there more of these?' and my dad would say 'yeah'. Dad's not bothered by all of that stuff." Her mom was supportive, too. "Even if she didn't understand it, mom would put me in little kids' nature hikes at River Legacy, which I loved."

We also talked about her relationship with nature generally. "When I think about going out and enjoying my surroundings it's like an escape. Nature is calming, it's beautiful, kind of like it sucks all the stress out of you when you're there." She talked about nature providing sustenance for her. "I can feel a connection with all the natural things around me, it's why I like running around barefoot – it feels good to have the ground on my feet."

And further, "I'm not a religious person - my church is right there in the dirt, my hymns are the wind running through the trees. I don't need anything else."

Her curiosity and love of nature are contagious. The day we talked about all this, her nine-year-old son was asking her to go on a walk to find some of the Mediterranean geckos around the house. He's learning about the lizards, treefrogs, and occasional snake around the house from an enthusiastic and loving teacher.



Jenna's son Mark with a Texas spiny lizard (photo: Jenna Harper)



Alice and Edgar

Alice and her younger brother Edgar have both gone through the Texas Master Naturalist program, which involves an initial commitment to a series of classes and afterwards volunteer time doing such things as restoring habitat or teaching the public. Periodically they get additional training to maintain their certification. The sister and brother got an early start in nature. Alice told me that when she was three, her family moved to a ranch near Monterrey, Mexico. There, she spent time exploring outside. She loved flowers – “not the big, showy ones, but small ones,” and she would bring them to her mom. Later, back in Texas, she lived near a pond where she developed an interest in insects and other critters. Later she would be a mentor to her little brother.

“My sister, although I hate to admit it, played a big role in shaping my comfort with animals,” Edgar recalled. “She would grab bugs and insects without hesitation, and because of that, I grew up unafraid of the little critters that most kids avoided.” He remembers riding his bike or walking with his dog at a nearby creek, catching frogs, lizards, spiders, and insects, keeping them for a day or two and then releasing them.

He said that their mom loved nature, but she had her limits. “I can still hear her shriek the morning a frog escaped its enclosure during the night and hopped out of her closet while she was getting dressed in the morning,” Edgar told me. Their father grew up in a small town in Mexico where, like in much of the U.S., people were taught to fear snakes and kill them. But, after seeing how much his kids loved them, his attitude changed. “Instead of panicking, he’d tell me to take the snake and move it across the road toward the neighbor’s pond so it wouldn’t come back.”

Edgar summarized his childhood experience this way: “Whether I was lying across a fallen tree by the creek, putting a baby bird back in its nest, or just noticing the strange shapes of mushrooms after a rain, those quiet moments taught me to slow down and appreciate the living world around me. Having a sister who shared that excitement, parents who showed different sides of what it means to coexist with nature, and constant access to the outdoors all helped spark my lasting passion for it.” Today, he works for a North Texas city as an environmental specialist, helping assure that the water is safe for humans and wildlife.

Alice is really drawn to insects and arachnids and the native plants that they rely on. “I don’t always learn all the names, but I’m very interested in their behavior,” she said. On a walk, we paused to watch a



colony of Comanche harvester ants. She remained quiet and still as, one after another, worker ants emerged from the colony's opening, each carrying a bit of sand and depositing it a few inches away. We were also captivated as we watched a worker carrying a seed with a husk bigger than itself, dragging and carrying it down into the ground to feed the colony.

One of the Ingredients for Nurturing Them: Opportunities

Lots of parents would be delighted for their child to have the kind of curiosity and love of nature that I have described. Most of us want to encourage this for our kids, not just because nature gets them active and is good for their health, but because we want our kids to have moments of being carefree and have experiences of awe and wonder. Let's discuss things that contribute to a love of nature, starting with opportunities for contact with nature.

One of the ingredients for nurturing nature kids is the chance to be outside, to touch and experience nature. Alice and Edgar grew up with access to ponds and creeks that they could explore during free time. Jenna grew up in places where she could find reptiles, and her mother made it possible for her to go on nature hikes. At the Fort Worth Nature Center, the kids Michael Perez described may have had limited opportunities to be in nature but the nature center made canoeing and camping possible.

There need to be "green" places to visit, and within urban areas these are limited. Fort Worth was reportedly losing about 50 acres of open space per week, leading the mayor and city council to create an open space program so that the growing city would not lose so much green space⁸. Dallas is reportedly ranked 34th in the U.S. for park access, equity, amenities, investment and acreage, according to the Dallas Observer⁹.

Parks with grass and trees are valuable, but if we're talking about "real" woodlands and other natural communities of plants and animals in urban Dallas-Fort Worth, the list is smaller but it includes some wonderful places. The Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge is one of the biggest urban preserves in the

⁸ Fort Worth Report. Green space is disappearing in Fort Worth. How will mayor's program preserve it? <https://fortworthreport.org/2024/01/22/green-space-is-disappearing-in-fort-worth-how-will-mayors-program-preserve-it/> (accessed 1/5/26).

⁹ Dallas Observer. Dallas Wants to be Developer Friendly. Will That Come at the Expense of Parks? <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/dallas-green-space-growth-could-be-hurt-by-park-fund-cuts-23128566/> (accessed 1/5/26)



country at over 3,600 acres. Tandy Hills Natural Area is another large preserve, boasting prairie and scattered woodland habitat with lots of biodiversity. In Dallas there is the Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning Area with about 2,600 acres. The Audubon Society has the Trinity River Audubon Center and Dogwood Canyon Audubon Center, both in Dallas County. In *Wild DFW*¹⁰, Amy Martin described 25 different natural areas in the DFW area (and there are a few others).

It is important to remember that many kids have little opportunity to be out in nature because their families may be stretched thin, with limited transportation and parents who have limited time and energy. Those parents or family members may be working multiple jobs or otherwise unable to take their kids to the woods and creeks¹¹. Better economic conditions for working parents could open doors to many things, including nature. Meanwhile we can try to bring nature to the kids. It's important that we plan urban parks and preserves to be accessible and inviting to everyone, and that we support efforts by schools to provide natural green space or green playgrounds.

Opportunity also requires free time and quite often it means parents or family members have to come along to supervise or insure children's safety. Some parents have little free time because they are juggling multiple jobs or are single-parent households. Other families may get overscheduled, with kids signed up for lessons and clubs on top of school and homework. As a result, they may have little free time.

And yet, free time or unstructured time has an important purpose. We may see it as wasted time, but such time teaches us self-management and creativity. If we don't learn how to cope with free time, what happens when there is nothing to do? Not knowing what to do with ourselves during free time, we say we are "bored" and too often we retreat to our phones. We miss chances to use our imaginations to invent games, write or draw, or else explore and discover the world around us.

Another thing that can limit opportunities to spend time in nature is parental worry about safety. In general, parents have become less willing to let their children play outside without supervision. We worry about traffic, we think about "stranger danger," and we are less likely to know and trust our neighbors than we used to. If we were confident that our neighborhood was a community that was watchful and

¹⁰ Martin, A. 2023. *Wild DFW: Explore the Amazing Nature In and Around Dallas-Fort Worth*. NY: Timber Press.

¹¹ Children and Nature Network. Literature Review: Equitable Access to Nature's Benefits.
<https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/CCCN-Literature-Review.pdf> (accessed 1/5/26)



ready to help a child who needed help, it would be easier to let them walk to the park by themselves. It's actually likely that almost anyone in most neighborhoods would offer to help a child, but neighbors often don't know each other and don't get involved in anyone else's business.

And then there's that prototypical image of the weird guy driving a panel truck and looking for a child to abduct. He's the one in the movies, the one we think of when we imagine our child playing outside or exploring a park without an adult. And sometimes he does exist. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that child abduction attempts by nonfamily members are the rarest (1%) of the cases reported to them; many more abductions involve noncustodial family members¹². The "Let Grow" website reports that the odds of a child being abducted by a stranger are about 1 in 720,000¹³. Car accidents or an injury from a fall are much more realistic dangers for children.

There are some dangers in the woods and fields that, in North Texas anyway, seem very manageable. I have lived in this area for over 60 years and visited nearby preserves often. Further away from the cities, I've been a fairly frequent visitor to the LBJ National Grasslands for 25 years. I have no injuries to show for it, and nothing that I would say was a close call, except from traffic on the highways going back and forth. When I have taken children out into these places, we've avoided the following possible hazards:

1. *Falls, drowning, heat-related illness.* Many of my favorite places have primitive trails where we could trip and fall, and for most people the solution is to go slowly enough and let your body learn to work with the roots, rocks, and inclines. Some wetlands are deep and warrant caution; I teach kids to know and respect their limits and not show off. It's also wise to always bring water and on hot summer days to avoid midday, seek shade, and stay hydrated. Risks from heat and drowning are not unique to nature. They are also present in our backyards and neighborhood pools.
2. *Poison ivy, nettle, thorns.* You remember Lilly's adventure walks? She is already recognizing greenbrier, which involves both thorns and trip hazards when a tough strand stretches across part of the trail. I've been commenting about poison ivy on our walks and she will learn that, too.

¹² National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Analysis of Attempted Abduction Trends. <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/analysis-of-attempted-abduction-trends.pdf> (accessed 1/6/26)

¹³ Let Grow. What's the Actual Risk of Your Child Being Kidnapped? <https://letgrow.org/child-kidnapping-risk/> (accessed 1/6/26)



But at age five her most important task is to pay attention to where she is walking when out in the woods. With me, she is learning to stay on the trails, and later she can learn when it's OK to go off the trail. With any kid, I think a crucial skill is to learn to notice what's around you and move through the woods and fields purposefully.

3. *Snakes, scorpions, spiders, wasps, ticks.* Here again, noticing things and moving purposefully are very important. Other than ticks, these animals want nothing to do with us; snakes don't attack or chase, but they sometimes come toward us as they try to escape. Many snakes will threaten or bite if they perceive that they have no choice, and that can happen if we purposely chase or harass them or if we accidentally step on them. Noticing where you put your hands and where you step almost always keeps you out of trouble. The same issues apply with stinging or biting invertebrates – keep an appropriate distance and enjoy these fascinating creatures. A child or adult with a medically significant sensitivity to bee and wasp venom should be even more vigilant but should manage the risk much like they would in any outdoor space. At the end of a walk in North Texas it is good to explore your body for ticks (and a parent can help a younger child to do this). We are more likely to pick them up if we have walked through high grass. Remove the tick with a pair of tweezers and wash the area as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control¹⁴.
4. *Bobcats, coyotes, dogs.* You might get a brief glimpse of a bobcat, but chances are it will disappear before you get close. This is often true for coyotes as well. People who are walking small dogs, or those who inadvertently get close to a den in pupping season are at greater risk. The first thing is to be aware of your surroundings and do not get close to these animals, especially if they do not appear to be afraid of you. There is good information about living near coyotes and other predators at the "Project Coyote" website, including recommended ways of discouraging them from becoming comfortable around humans¹⁵. Actually, any of us is at greater risk from attacks by aggressive or feral dogs than we are from wildlife¹⁶.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What to Do After a Tick Bite. <https://www.cdc.gov/ticks/after-a-tick-bite/index.html> (accessed 1/6/26)

¹⁵ Project Coyote. Hazing Field Guide. <https://projectcoyote.org/hazing-field-guide/> (accessed 1/6/26)

¹⁶ Tuckel, P.S. & W. Milczarski. 2020. The changing epidemiology of dog bite injuries in the United States, 2005–2018. *Injury Epidemiology*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-020-00281-y> (accessed 1/7/26)



What is the most realistic way to be protective? It is a parent's or teacher's knowledge of the area and knowledge of the child and his or her age and skills. Parents have to consider the risks and benefits of anything their child does. Allowing a child to use the internet and social media involves increasingly well documented risks of depression, bullying, and exploitation. However, in the right hands at the right time, the internet opens up many places, cultures, and the arts. And in the same way, letting a child explore parks and preserves or even the creek behind your house involves some risk, but what if you give this child some guided experience and knowledge? Then, at the right age, most children can explore a place with some degree of self-direction and independence.

You will find an interesting perspective about judging risk in the enchanting little book, *Walk When the Moon is Full*¹⁷. Noted ornithologist Frances Hamerstrom and her family lived on a farm in Wisconsin. She and her two kids started a practice of taking a walk on the farm once a month when the moon was full, just walking by moonlight into the woods, to a pond, discovering moonlit sparkles in the snow or slipping into the pond at midnight to get close to a calling frog. One walk was barefoot through the summer grass to see fireflies. Another took place on a December night when the temperature was 32 degrees below zero, finding weasels playing on an ice-covered marsh. The children, Elva and Alan, loved the walks and never let their mother forget when the moon was full.

Not every place would be as suitable as the Wisconsin farm and not every child would do well in such immersive walks, but consider how magical the experiences were and how much the kids treasured them (Elva went on to illustrate a later edition, and the practice continued across generations to the great-grandchildren). Find an acceptable level of adventure and pursue it if you can.

What's Next

We have discussed how nature can benefit kids and explored a few examples of how a love of nature can begin. Then we talked about access to nature and opportunities to explore. Next, we will take up other ingredients for nurturing a nature kid, such as experiencing wonder and joy and having supportive adults. We will touch on a few things that might limit positive experiences, such as kids who are bored, anxious, or fearful in nature, and what we can do. And if you are a parent or teacher, the next chapter will offer a frame of reference and some strategies for supporting your child.

¹⁷ Hamerstrom, F. 1975. *Walk When the Moon is Full*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.