



Younger

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Middle

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Older

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Micro Environments

I remember taking my two young children to a wonderful overlook. We hiked the better part of two hours to get there. The view was breathtaking, with lakes and hills glistening in the afternoon sun. And there were my two children hunched at their feet, staring at a caterpillar crawling along the ground. Young children have a contracted view of the environment; they respond to what's immediately in front of them. Spend time with your younger children soaking in the details of your surroundings.

Middle Childhood (in-be-tweens): Ages 8-12

This is an evocative age—an age ripe for discovery and immersion in natural landscapes. Flipping over logs, climbing trees, wading in wetlands, jumping in puddles, catching bugs in ponds and staring upward into the deep beyond of the night sky are all activities that children of this age love to engage in. Children at this age are born explorers, full of unbridled enthusiasm and energy for the world around them. Sadly, this is also the time that many children are holed up inside, trapped behind a glowing screen. Take the time to explore, wander and savour nature together.

Kids this age also need to feel a sense of agency and need to believe that they can and will make a difference. Encourage kids to participate in activities that enhance nature in their own neighbourhood, perhaps by naturalizing a backyard or a school ground—building nesting boxes, planting trees, creating butterfly gardens—or by helping to protect local green spaces.

Older Children: Ages 12 to 17

As kids get older they yearn for adventure! They want to prove that they are tough, strong and resilient (which of course, they are!). They often yearn for activities with an element of competition.

Recreational Exploration

Ah the pendulum teenager! One moment sitting sullen, arms folded on the couch, angry at the world; the next moment, jumping around the living room, coursing with enough energy to power a small town. One way to deal with these mood swings is to introduce your teenagers to the outdoor skills that help them connect to nature. Take them on an overnight camping trip. Make sure that your itinerary is robust enough to be challenging but they have the food, clothing and equipment to be comfortable, even in inclement weather. Competitive activities such as geo-caching are also popular with teenagers and still have a modicum of nature appreciation.

Traditional Skills

Have your children experiment with bow drill fire making, shelter building, basic tool making or cordage. There's something immensely satisfying about creating your own fire by rubbing wood against wood.

Build Nature Skills

For teens that show an interest in nature, encourage them to contact a local naturalist club. They may know of teenagers in your community who are active birders. Your son or daughter may be able to join them on their outings.

High schools often have environmental or outdoor clubs. Many schools also take part in *envirothons*, which are environmentally-themed academic competitions. Contact the science department at your high school to see if this is an option for your family.

Find a local cause and encourage your kids to get involved. There is always a wetland to save, a park to protect or habitats to enhance. Kids need to feel like they can make a difference—that they matter. Participating in local action empowers a child and helps them recognize what it means to be part of a larger community, one that also includes the natural world.

Engaging your children at all ages and stages with the natural world is one great step to nurturing our very own future earth stewards. •