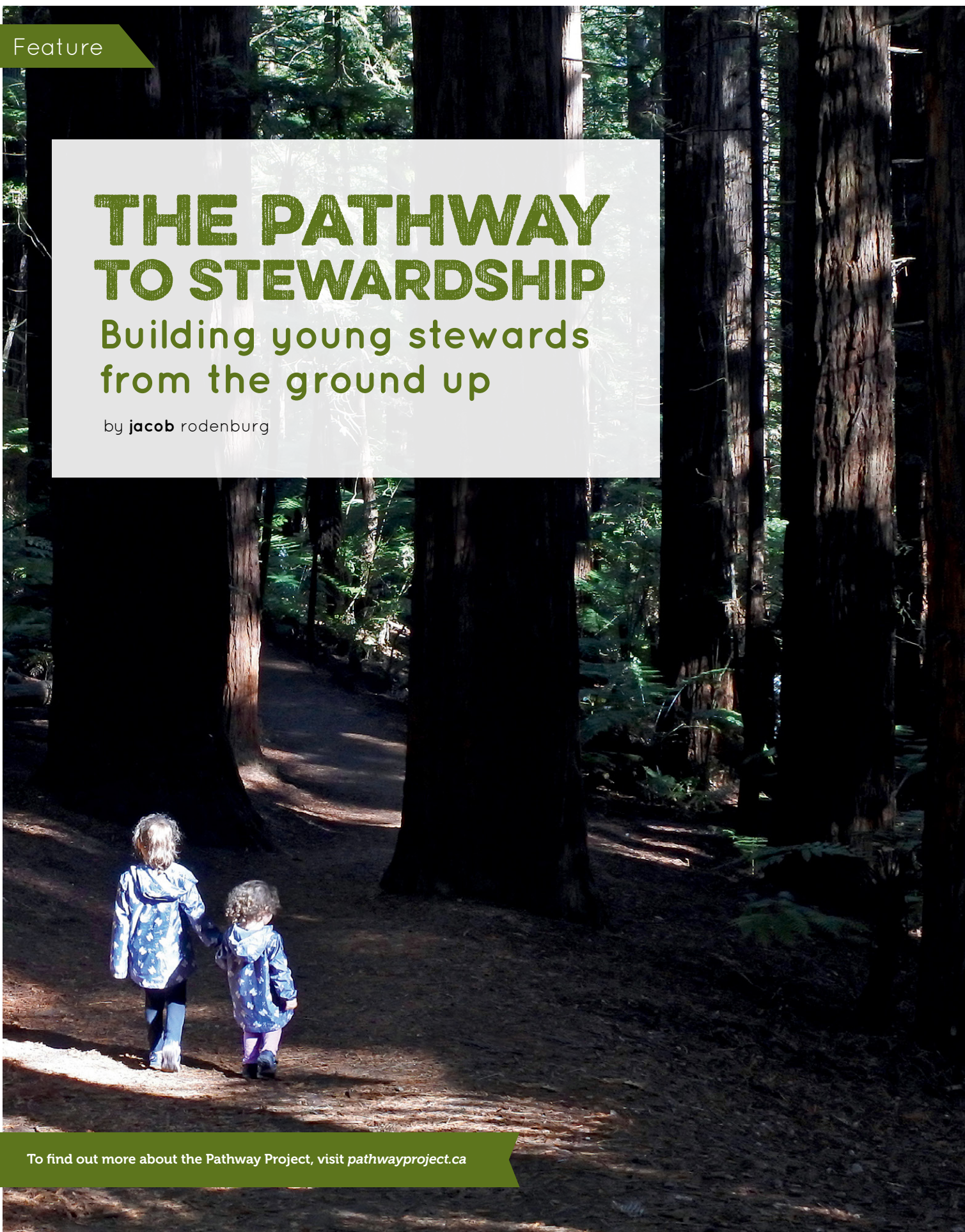


THE PATHWAY TO STEWARDSHIP

Building young stewards from the ground up

by **jacob** rodenburg



To find out more about the Pathway Project, visit pathwayproject.ca

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It's a scary world out there! The earth is warming, habitats are disappearing, animals are going extinct, there is plastic in the ocean, and there are close to 8 billion people on the planet, with each person wanting their share of food, shelter, and stuff! If you're a kid, you might be thinking: "You want me to do what? Fix it? I didn't create this mess! What's the point? It's all going downhill anyway!" As parents, we want to inspire and empower our children to become environmental stewards, building hope instead of harbouring "ecophobia" (afraid to do anything positive for the environment because it all seems so hopeless). No matter how young your kiddos are, they can become an engaged steward at every age and stage of their development.

Raising environmentally engaged citizens doesn't happen by itself. As Simeon Ogonda, a youth development leader from Kenya, phrased it: "Many of us often wonder what kind of planet we're leaving behind for our children. But few ask the opposite: what kind of children are we leaving behind for our planet?" We are collectively responsible for fostering the stewards of tomorrow and activating the next generation is more important than ever.

Studies have shown that children today are more anxious, more distracted, and less healthy than the last generation. It may be hard to believe but the average child spends more than seven hours a day in front of a glowing screen and less than 20 minutes in active outdoor play! At the same time there is mounting evidence that exposure to nature while growing up reduces stress, improves physical and mental health, stimulates creativity, builds self-esteem, and encourages co-operation, collaboration, and self-regulation. The work of Joy Palmer, an environmental educational researcher, found that regular exposure to nature is the single most important factor in fostering care and concern for the environment.

ON THE PATHWAY

If we truly want to foster the environmental citizens of tomorrow, we need to involve our entire community. *The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship*, a program being developed in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada is a great example of just that. A collaboration between educators, professors, Indigenous leaders, public health officials, and conservationists, the aim is to find ways for every child in the region to participate in key stewardship experiences regardless of age or stage.

The Pathway group recognized that children need to be provided with the right opportunities, tools, and experiences to know, love, respect, and protect the very life systems that sustain and nurture us all. This includes learning from Indigenous teachings, especially in the way that many First Nations view their relationship with the land. For example, the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) word *Nwiikaanigana* (roughly meaning "all my relations") embodies the idea that we are part of a much larger family that includes the natural world. Being a steward does not imply entitlement, power, or dominion over the earth; rather, it means teaching children to use their powers to become engaged citizens of and for the earth.

Everyone, no matter their age or ability, can do something positive for the environment. Tending a garden, raising butterflies, caring for a natural area, or reducing energy consumption are just some of the simple ways we empower our youth to make a positive impact in their own community. From an Indigenous perspective, acting with responsibility means *responding* with our *abilities*. Every positive action leads to a sense of hope. And every bit of hope is empowering.

Imagine the journey of stewardship as a pathway. Along this journey, children need certain experiences in the world around them as they grow to become activated stewards, and each experience generates the confidence to develop new ones. Here is a brief guide to what you can do with your children to foster stewardship.

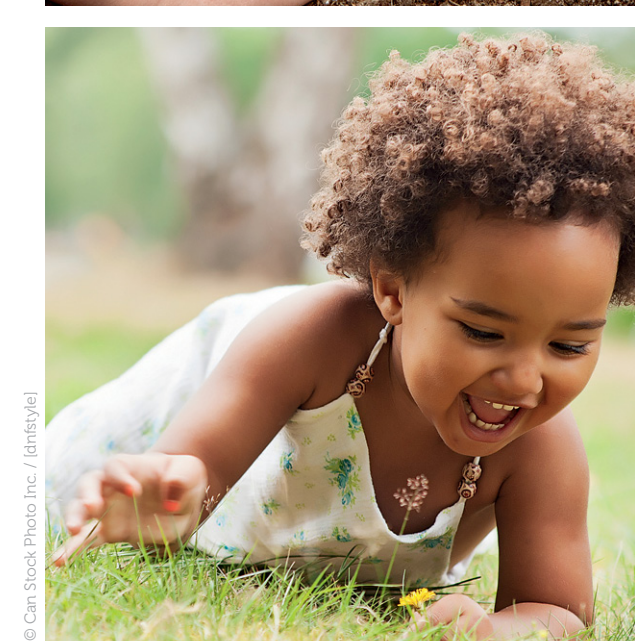
We hope to see you on the Pathway!

Stewardship means a sense of connection to, caring about, and responsibility for each other, and the natural world around us.

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Stewardship: A GUIDE FOR THE AGES

CORE STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLE	STEWARDSHIP OPPORTUNITY
For Early Years (Birth to 3 years)	
Exercise the senses everyday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be a “stroller explorer” in your local green spaces and parks. » Turn over rocks and logs to see what lives underneath. » Watch ants to see where they go. Dig in soil, wade in water, pick up sticks, roll in the grass, jump in puddles.
Have positive experiences with animals at least once per week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Watch birds come to a feeder. » Pet a gentle cat or dog. » Look for worms and watch them crawl. » Read nature books about animals.
Young Children (Ages 4 to 7)	
Exercise the senses every day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Cup your hands behind your ears, what do you hear? » Smell flowers, smell the rain, smell the grass and the earth. » Be an “all around watcher”: What can you see in nature? » Sample seasonal tastes: berries in summer, apples in fall, squash in winter.
Deepen relationships and understanding	» Choose an outdoor place to explore and play in. Visit regularly. Provide loose parts for kids to manipulate (sticks, stones, tree slices).
Reinforce and expand the developing sense of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Plant, tend, and harvest something that can be eaten. » Encourage butterflies with their favourite plants. » Care for an animal.
Celebrate seasons	» Find simple ways to recognize and enjoy the change of each season.
Cultivate sensory awareness of nearby nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Identify natural sounds and smells. » Explore micro-environments (peek under rocks/logs, create a mini trail).
Encourage knowledge of their “neighborhood”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Get to know plants, birds, and five insects living in your area. » Our community consists of other living things, as well as humans and built structures. Create a mural that depicts the characters of your neighborhood structures.
Offer a creative response to time spent outside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Develop art projects using natural materials. » Create a story or a play about the characters in your neighborhood.

CORE STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLE	STEWARDSHIP OPPORTUNITY
For Middle Childhood (Ages 8 to 11)	
Develop more complex outdoor skills (7 hours per week)	Try hiking, survival skills, orienteering, birding, and astronomy.
Explore human impact on the environment; develop leadership and decision-making skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Create a small naturalized area. » Manage a school recycling or composting project or plan a small stream/river clean-up project. » Write about the history of the piece of land you occupy.
Expand understanding of relationship between living things and their habitats.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Take a bio-physical inventory of a natural area, finding at least 10 species each of plants, animals and insects. » Get involved in citizen science projects: monitor bird, butterfly, and amphibian populations or ecosystem health by conducting basic water and soil tests.
Expand understanding of sustainable lifestyles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be an energy detective: What kind of energy is used at home or school? What renewable energy systems are in your region? » Design an energy efficient home.
For Older Children (Ages 13 and older)	
Expand skill and confidence in outdoor awareness, responsibility, and survival.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Research sustainable harvest. » Learn to use maps, compass and/or GPS, and recognize constellations.
Deepen understanding of lifestyle on environment. Seek solutions to ecological imbalances.	» Calculate your ecological footprint and make a goal to reduce it.
Expand understanding and empathy while exploring and responding to local social and environmental issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Volunteer with a local organization that is making a difference. Plant trees. » Teach outdoor skills. » Arrange for a local environmental hero to speak at your school.
Learn about social and environmental justice	» Find an issue of local concern that needs to be solved. How does this issue align with global issues? Get involved.
Express your feelings about your local environment.	» Write a story, a poem, create a visual art piece that captures your feelings about the land you occupy.