

# 7 Tips For Connecting Children With Nature

Are we doing enough for the kids?

It's a question driving the ceaseless thoughts and fears of countless parents & educators.

I certainly don't claim to have all the answers, but I am very confident that connecting children with nature is one big piece of the puzzle.

Nature is something that's often missing in the home life and school life of developing bodies and minds.



Yet research in child development shows that there are tremendous benefits of connecting children with nature.

- Children who spend quality time outside develop stronger immune systems and healthy emotional coping skills.
- [Learning about nature teaches](#) empathy, pattern recognition, social skills & scientific curiosity.
- Fostering connection to nature is truly one of the best ways to spark a love for learning at early ages.

So how can you as a parent/educator of our future politicians, scientists, entrepreneurs & doctors... help to develop these connections in the best possible way?

In this article I'd like to share what I've learned from my own studies in [nature-based learning tools](#) and working outside with kids from ages 4-17.

Here are 7 tips for connecting children with nature...

## #1 Always Start With Curiosity

Curiosity is always the first step in effective learning...

Have you ever tried teaching something to a child that wasn't curious about what you wanted to share? It really doesn't work!

Traditional education makes the assumption that teachers have all the knowledge, and their job is to bestow that knowledge upon the child.

But have you ever considered that maybe this isn't the right way to spark human learning? What other options do we have?

Let the child lead the learning with natural curiosity!

Something really incredible happens when you put children in a natural setting and give them unstructured play time. They naturally start to explore and ask questions about their environment!

Then all you have to do is catch the moment and help it grow. Your job is simply to facilitate and see what happens.

Ask yourself:

- What am I curious about in nature?
- What are the kids curious about in nature?
- How can we share our curiosity together?

You can never predict what will catch the attention of a child. It might be bugs or flowers or fort-building or sliding down hills.

At first glance this much unstructured time outside might just look like play, but on closer inspection you'll discover that nature is actually a big classroom.

Nature is ripe with opportunities to promote insight, critical thinking & scientific discovery. And here's how to take advantage of it.

## #2 Observe The Child

Observation tells you what children are excited to learn before they realize it for themselves...

Sometimes the best thing to do as a facilitator of nature-based learning is to step back and observe.

Children play differently when they aren't being controlled and directed by adults. They drop into a natural rhythm of activity being led by their own goals & interests.

This gives you an opportunity to watch their behavior and spot trends that will help you coax them into new discoveries and insights about plants, birds, ecosystems, seasons, etc.

Here's an example:

One time I was with a group of kids that were excited to explore a little trail leading into a blackberry thicket. We followed their curiosity.

As we walked into the brambles... myself and the other instructors discovered numerous deer beds with scat and [other signs of deer](#).

It created an opportunity to talk about the deer and their presence as well as impact on the [landscape ecology](#).

When were they last here? How old are these droppings? Do they look wet and new? Or old and dried out? Can anyone find any deer hair? Does anyone know what deer eat?

The kids got so excited about deer that we decided to play a game where we all pretended to be deer hiding in the bushes from a mountain lion.

We were able to facilitate a 30 minute [nature-based mindfulness](#) exercise that teaches quiet listening & careful observation in a group of wild 6-8 year olds that also gave insights about local wildlife.



## #3 Context Is The Key

The context for connecting children with nature simply means providing a good space for children to play outside.

If all you do is give space for children to play outside then learning will happen naturally.

Indoor spaces typically lack the variety and complexity to capture the full imaginative capacity of childhood.

So one of your biggest jobs as a parent or educator is simply creating or finding a space with enough options for children to choose their own adventure.

Here are some examples of ideal outdoor classroom spaces that always provide hours of engagement & discovery:

- Locations with a water feature like streams, lakesides, rivers & oceans.
- A deep forest location with hiding places and fort-building opportunities
- Gardens with tending opportunities and the ability to [watch things grow](#) (and eventually become eaten) over time.
- Sandbars for [wildlife tracking](#) & construction projects.

Obviously, the needs for space will vary with age group. Older groups like teens will really benefit from adventures into less traveled areas where they can feel the edge of the wilderness.

But don't underestimate the abilities of especially young children to find excitement and adventure in simple outdoor spaces. I've spent hours exploring mud puddles and watching the movements of worms and insects with kids in just a tiny area of lawn space. If you ever get stuck for ideas... Just take the kids outside and ask them where they want to go.



## #4 Have A Plan... (But Throw Away Your Agenda)

Here's my simple recipe for connecting children with nature...

\*\*Get kids engaged with [nature in a sensory way](#) by facilitating activities like wildlife tracking, bird language, [harvesting & using things from nature](#), and observing the patterns/cycles of an ecosystem.\*\*

But read this... It doesn't matter HOW you actually implement that plan.

You might have a plan to [take them tracking](#) at a local sandbar, but on the way you discover a big patch of ripe cranberries.

If the kids are really excited about harvesting cranberries then you shouldn't try to pull them out of that experience.

Instead you can join them in their curiosity and nurture this experience.

- How do you know these are cranberries and not something else?
- Are there other plants that are lookalikes?
- Are there any poisonous plants we should be aware of here?
- Why are the berries growing in this location and not others?
- How do you tell when they're ripe?
- We should collect some and bring them back home
- Do you want to learn my 5 minute berry basket technique?

And you can still use this opportunity to bring in lessons about tracking and relationships to wildlife...

- One time I was eating berries and a bird came right up to me and took one from my hand
- Do you think there are other animals here who might want to eat these berries?
- What other animals might we find in a place like this?

[You'll always have better results by going with what nature offers](#) and what the kids are most interested in.

## #5 Harvest The Memories



This is one of my favorites...

Always remember that what happens after an outdoor experience is just as important as the experience itself. Learning doesn't have to stop just because you come back inside.

I always say there are two important phases in the nature discovery learning cycle.

There's what happens outside in the moment of exploration, and then what happens in the mind of your student as they think & reflect on the experience

You can help young people reflect on their experiences by [asking questions](#) and helping them think more deeply the memories.

- What was your favourite part of the day?
- What should we do with all those berries we harvested?
- What did you learn about plants today?
- Does anyone have any other stories about deer? I do!

You can complement outdoor learning with indoor activities like scrapbooking, journaling, drawing, and reading books appropriate to their age-group.

This is how one simple encounter with a plant or bird outside can turn into a life-long journey of learning & discovery.

## #6 You Connect First

This is sometimes a tough one, but it's really important...

If you aren't connected to nature, then it will be very difficult to help your children & students connect with nature.

This is not about knowledge of information or facts. It's not about reading lots of books. It's about your own ability to read the stories of nature and engage with the world on a sensory level.

Now here's the good news...

If you DO [connect with nature](#) then it will be very easy to bring kids along with you. Nurture your own curiosity for nature and the kids will follow.

This is about [mentoring and your ability to be a leader](#) without being a dictator.

For example – Let's say a child gets excited about collecting flowers. That child is in a state of curiosity. Their mind is like a sponge.

If you're able to offer relevant information and reflection questions at this critical moment... then they will absorb that information at a very deep level.

Your ability to ask questions and share relevant insights about plants will only be limited by your own connection to plants.

This is why working with adults is my particular area of passion.

I love helping people develop their natural passions and outdoor skills because that makes it so much easier to pass it on to the next generation.

The deeper we as adults go into our own connections with nature, the better we're able to pass these gifts on as parents and teachers.

If you want to get better at reading patterns in nature, I created a free video called [how to read the secrets of a forest](#). I have readers and subscribers from all over the world and I'd love to help you explore nature more deeply too!

## # 7 Keep It Fun

Perhaps most importantly...

Nature connection is always supposed to be fun and engaging.

So if you're ever out there and it feels like a struggle and not fun at all... that's a sign that you might be trying too hard, or not paying attention to where the interest of the children is actually focused.

This doesn't mean that every moment needs to be high energy and exciting.

It simply means that the experience will have a positive feeling without a lot of resistance.

- What can we do outside that will be fun, engaging and educational?
- Where can we explore that will be new and different?
- What are the ripe opportunities in our current season & climate?
- What past passions have I observed in the kids that we could extend more deeply today?

As you can see there's an entire art & science to the skill of connecting children with nature. These are just 7 tips that I've learned over the years.

Of course the best way to learn is to experience it for yourself, so get outside and have fun in nature!

<https://nature-mentor.com/7-tips-for-connecting-children-with-nature/>