

# Finding Nature in Urban Settings

Show of hands of all you city-dwelling parents that want to incorporate more nature into your child's life, but feel inhibited due to your urban surroundings. Today's post is for YOU! Being outdoors and immersed in nature isn't just for kids that live in the country. An outdoor lifestyle and love of nature are possible to foster no matter where you live. I'm thrilled to have Amber Richcreek of [The Playful Learner](#) here today sharing all kinds of ways you can find nature in the city. Because one of the benefits of living in a big city is easy-access to so many wonderful things — nature should be one of them! Today, we'll show you how to make that happen.

## City vs. nature

I've spent a lot of my life completely immersed in natural settings. I grew up in the middle of nowhere on an acre of land, right by a national forest in the mountains of New Mexico. My husband and I fell in love while traveling the United States and hiking through national parks. Spending time outdoors is one of our favorite things to do together.



However, before having kids, immersing myself in nature felt like an all or nothing thing. I lived in the city; nature was something I visited on the weekends and on vacation. We were living in Seattle when we had our first son. Shortly thereafter, we moved north to a smaller city with a population 87,000 residents. It's not as urban as Seattle, but it's still substantial. We live about a 15-minute walk to downtown and just a couple blocks off from a major street.

## Prioritizing outdoor time

This past year when choosing my New Year's resolution, I sat down and reflected the things that are most important to me and the values I want to instill in my children. I then



wrote out a schedule of the things we actually do every day to see how the two listed compared. At the top of my "values" list was spending time nature and instilling a sense of love and responsibility for Mother Earth in my kids. However, while spending time in nature was at the top of my values list, I realized we almost *never* went outside! That's when I knew that I needed to make nature a part of our daily lives, no matter where we lived.

We are a one-car family and my husband uses that car to commute every day, so driving into the country with my children isn't an option on the weekdays. We needed to figure out ways to incorporate nature into our daily lives with just walking nearby, or maybe a bus. I no longer wanted the excuse of living in a city to stop us from connecting with the environment and spending time outdoors. I realized that being immersed in nature couldn't be all or nothing anymore. It's too important and shouldn't have to wait for the weekends or vacation. We need more nature every day!

## Ways to find urban nature in the city

When you live in the country it's easy to immerse yourself in nature. It's obvious...nature's right there! But when you're in a city it's easy to forget that nature is still all around you and never far away. Research has shown that having even just a little bit of natural settings in an urban environment can help with anxiety and depression. Finding those little pockets of Mother Earth for our children isn't just a nice idea; it's essential for their mental health!



Today I'm here to share some simple ways we've put urban nature into our every day lives in the city. I hope these ideas will inspire more city-dwelling parents to get outside more with their kids and explore. Because nature really is all around, you just have to look for it!

## Look up



We live in the Pacific Northwest so we have plenty of clouds. I've taken to pointing them out to my son. Looking for familiar shapes in the clouds, and telling the weather. Now, instead of only looking up for airplanes and helicopters, we look up to find birds, bees and butterflies. We lay under trees in the park and watch the sky shine through the leaves, soaking up the sun and enjoying the fresh air.

We also love looking up at the night sky, too. While city lights may block out some stars, the moon is almost always visible. We observe the phases of the moon and watch for special lunar events, like new moons, supermoons and blood moons.

## Look down

Nature is literally right there at your feet! Make sure to look down occasionally and your child will be delighted to find a variety of insects, crawly critters, worms and even flowers growing through the pavement. Little ones are so close to the ground already, it gives them a great vantage point for discoveries. I only had to point out natural novelties on the ground a couple times before my son started finding these things (and more) on his own.



And while your child is looking down, let them turn over stones and look for roly-pollies. Point out any mushrooms you find or pinecones that have fallen from trees. There are all kinds of discoveries kids can make just by being observant of what's right at their feet.



## Watching a favorite tree through the seasons

My son has a cherry tree right outside his bedroom window. We started watching it when it was beginning to sprout new buds and leaves after the winter. It was a beautiful pink in the spring, and so we call it "Solomon's Pink Tree." Now, this tree is part of our morning ritual. We look out his bedroom window to check on his pink tree every day, observing it through the seasons and watching how it changes. Sometimes in the afternoons we'll go outside and sit under it, have a picnic or read a book. We hung a bird feeder on a branch and now we love watching the birds eat, communicate and chase each other. Our tree is located on that strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street, but it's our own little slice of Mother Earth, right in the city.

## Parks aren't just playgrounds

Almost every city has hidden away parks filled with nature. We are lucky to have a lot of parks in our city. Before my New Year's goal to spend more time in nature, we would go to the park just for the playground and then head home. However, I recently discovered that parks have so much more to offer than playground equipment! Now, we make a point to walk around and explore the whole area, including any wooded areas, creeks, and streams.



Some of our parks have perfectly landscaped nature that's not meant for exploring. In that instance, we just look. We listen for bird songs, look for nests, point to the different flowers and plants, watch for squirrels, etc. Sometimes we're lucky enough to find a city park with some wild nature we're allowed to explore! I usually do a quick visual check that there are no homeless people sleeping in the bushes (we are in a city, after all), and then allow my son to explore around as he chooses.

**Neighborhoods** We feel so fortunate to live in such a beautiful neighborhood surrounded by neighbors who love to garden. On days when a trek to the park isn't in the cards, we'll stick closer to home and just circle the block and enjoy our neighbor's yards and gardens. One of our neighbors even has chickens! My son constantly requests to "visit the chickens." Some of our neighbors have vegetable gardens, and that sparks conversations about how much of our food comes from Mother Earth.

We love playing iSpy in our neighborhood or going on a [neighborhood scavenger hunt](#). It's amazing how much nature you can find on your own street if you're actively out looking for nature.



## Community gardens



We rent, so, unfortunately, we cannot plant our own garden, but we're on the waitlist for a plot in the community garden. Lots of cities have community gardens for those that rent or don't have space in their yard. Community gardens are a series of plots where you can rent out a garden box or two and grow your own flowers, fruits or veggies.

When we lived in Seattle, I worked at a preschool with a drab, metal, green-less playground that jutted out into a parking lot. However, across the street we had a large plot in the community garden. Together, our school community and the children built a beautiful little oasis in the city with climbing peas, lush greens and potato buckets. It's amazing how children will eat kale by the handful when you tell them, "You can eat that plant!" If you have a yard or garden, encourage that! And if not, look into your city's community garden options. Even if you have a black thumb like me, the experience of digging in the dirt and trying is worth it.

## Making small changes

That realization about my imbalance of values and time followed by implementing these simple changes has impacted our lives dramatically for the better. Getting outdoors and into nature is no longer an all or nothing thing for us; it's a part of our daily lives. It's had a huge effect on my older son and how he views the outdoors. Two-year-olds are like little mirrors, they mimic our habits and phrases. I've found that now on walks my son will say things like "Look at this flower, mama!" or "What's this, mama?" as he picks up a pinecone, rock or leaf. It's not sweeping mountain views or acreage of pasture or long hikes through national parks, but it's still impactful. Even just small changes of getting outside a few minutes every day or a few times a week can make a huge difference. Every time we go outside my children are learning to cherish nature, and pay attention to it in their everyday lives. And that's the best way to start.



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## Finding Nature in Urban Settings with Kids

It is a wild misconception that being a “city kid” means depriving young minds of nature and the benefits of a free-range life. When done intentionally, children raised in the city have a unique opportunity to tap into a larger community of nature lovers. While there are some considerations and logistics to giving urban dwellers a sense of connection with the earth, it is possible, and even enjoyable, to find parks and nature within a concrete jungle.

## Why you should get your city kid into nature

There are many reasons your children should find nature, even in the city. The big takeaway though is that taking the time to connect with nature is good for them, others, and the earth. It is a one-stop-shop for well-being. Here are some additional reasons city kids need nature too.

- The most pressing reason is the care and knowledge of our earth and nature. As we construct more buildings, creating time to appreciate and engage with nature will be more critical than ever. The more we know about how the earth functions, the more we can preserve it for all living beings.
- Yoga and meditation have shown that grounding and connecting to the earth and all the elements, fosters positive self-awareness and supports healthy social-emotional development in children (and adults). In fast-paced city life, seeking moments with our earth can help children calm their nervous systems and lead happier lives.
- The earth is the one thing that connects us with every living being. Finding friends and meeting new people through nature activities supports bonding and social awareness of others. Not to mention, a healthy earth is good for our fellow citizens. So, learning to care for the planet is also about learning to care for each other.



How to find nature in  
urban settings with kids  
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Now that you know the benefits of exploring urban nature with kids, let's get outside.

## Exploring urban nature with kids

The most basic start to finding nature in urban settings is to get outside. Not every location is nature, but there is nature in every location. Yes, you read that right. Nature is in every outdoor location, even if it isn't as obvious when you are surrounded by skyscrapers and cement.

## Here are five easy ways to explore nature in a city environment

1. The sun, the wind, the rain, and the temperature outside? All nature. Take a mindful and adventurous walk and explore how these elements affect you and the people and things around you. Splash in puddles or play in the rain. Feel the wind on your face or watch how the wind sways the trees. These are things that are all a part of our earth.
2. Even the most densely populated skyscraper city has a tree or a patch of grass, someplace. Find it. Study it. Play in it.
3. Bugs, birds, squirrels, and so many more critters make their homes in densely urban settings. Go for a walk and count the birds you see, find a bug and study what it does. Find some skat (bird and dog poop counts) and see if you can figure out what kind of animal made it.
4. Grabbing a picnic or even patio seating at a restaurant is a practice in enjoying nature. Soak in the experience. Find a farm-to-table restaurant or farmers' market and get to know the enthusiastic people about where our food comes from. I guarantee most of them will be thrilled to chat up young nature lovers about their process.
5. Flowers are often planted outside businesses and in various places for landscaping. Find some and smell them. Can't find any outside, meander through a farmer's market and find a flower vendor or walk to a grocery store and stroll through the floral department. Flowers do not need to be wildflowers to be enjoyed in nature.

## Enjoying city parks with kids



Almost every city has a park district. Park districts are a great place to start for some more extensive and often inexpensive activities. Parks are also the perfect place to explore and discover urban nature with kids.

Going to a city's park and recreation department website can tell you a few things:

1. The location of all of the city-owned parks, playgrounds, beaches, conservatories, zoos, farms, pools, splash pads, or other features. This is great for planning and getting the most accurate information on location, hours, and potential activities.
2. Scheduled activities and programming. The park districts often have classes for kids, adults, and often families. They also may lead volunteer opportunities, concerts, animal encounters, and tours.

Once you arrive at a city-owned park, explore the signs and plaques that will often give information about the history or essential facts about where you are. Every city park has a unique story. Especially as urban areas build bigger and taller buildings, nature's survival in urban areas is a task and a beautiful story of love and care.

## Explore arboretums and gardens



## Helping make a difference

We are big believers that nature should be accessible for all. And spending time outside in nature shouldn't be just for kids that live in the country, on farms, or in the mountains. City kids need nature and outdoor playtime just as much (if not more) than ever. According to the [national PTA organization](#), one-third of all US children live in urban areas. Living in urban areas can mean it is difficult to access natural

areas, even when they're not far away. Longstanding systems of inequity have influenced the design and distribution of green spaces in and around cities and urban areas.

Cities across the country are searching for ways to bring nature's benefits to all children. As are parents, community leaders, educators, and people like YOU (and us) that believe in the importance of nature for all. Achieving change requires a community-based approach and lots of help. Organizations such as [Children's Nature Network](#) have great resources and toolkits to get you started if you're interested in helping more city kids discover urban nature and making it more accessible for all.

## Now go run wild, my city child! How do you find nature in the city?

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