

## Go Climb a Tree; Getting Youth Outdoors

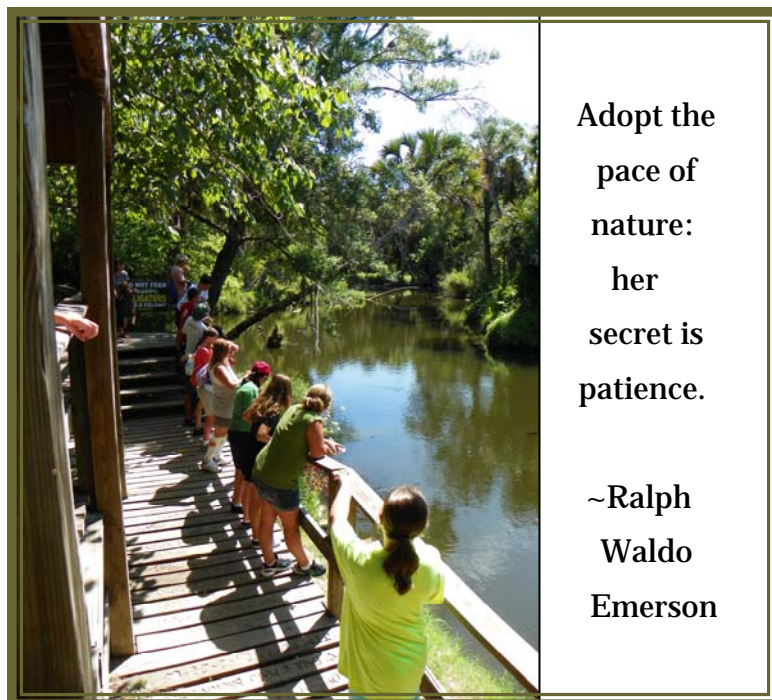
Vanessa Spero-Swingle

Promoting a healthy lifestyle for youth, one that includes going outside and playing outdoors, can be difficult with the multitude of obligations so many of us have. Between work, school, cleaning the house, afterschool activities, clubs, sports, etc. the list goes on and on. At the same time, the benefits of having even 30 minutes a day outdoors are well worth the scheduling conflicts that can be encountered.

Studies have found that time spent outdoors and learning about the environment can improve grades, reasoning, and comprehension skills in youth. For youth with learning disabilities, free uninhibited time outdoors can help relieve stressors and allow youth the time they need to engage in their surroundings. Furthermore, as youth unplug and move outdoors, there is a smaller chance of them becoming part of the increasing obesity epidemic that children now fall into.

Where to begin? Here are some tips to get you started on when you venture outdoors:

- Safety first- be prepared with a small first aid kit if you're going for a long hike, any allergy medications that are necessary, a cell phone, tell someone where you going, know what poison ivy looks like so you can avoid it, etc.
- Be prepared- bring a snack, water, sunscreen, hat, sunglasses, etc.
- Be respectful- set guidelines and rules on what is appropriate when exploring (don't allow children to run off where they can't be seen, don't allow children to destroy any plants or insects, etc.)
- Be enthusiastic- the more excited and animated an adult is about everything that can be discovered, the more a child will pick up on this and be enthusiastic too!
- Get involved and hands on- sometimes it is okay to touch what you see, to get dirty, to get wet.



Adopt the  
pace of  
nature:  
her  
secret is  
patience.

~Ralph  
Waldo  
Emerson

Short on ideas of what to do? Here are some options:

- Create a discovery kit- children love to feel like they are scientists and explorers, so help them by providing the tools they need to discover new items. Include things like simple scientific equipment (hand lens, binoculars, ruler, pencil, paper, compass, gardening tools, collecting equipment, containers, etc.), a box of crayons (for sketching, to compare colors of nature with crayon colors, create leaf rubbings, etc.), a camera, etc.
- Set a goal- try to walk an entire trail from start to finish, take nature photographs and exhibit them in a local contest (Indian River Lagoon photo contest, Brevard County Fair), sketch a flower to exhibit, learn the calls of local birds, find the oddest piece of trash or collect the most trash/sea beans at the beach, create a garden and eat a salad from your garden, etc.
- Plan ahead- look for local guided hikes and festivals that occur during the year geared toward your family's interests- Earth Day celebrations, forest fun days, Spacecoast Birding Festival, kids fishing days, gardening workshops, etc. Check with local sites such as UF Brevard County Extension, Brevard County Parks and Recreation, Environmentally Endangered Lands, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Viera Wetlands, local nurseries, Eco-tour companies, etc. Your child may discover what he/she likes by attending one of these events with the many exhibitors that are sometimes on display.
- Enroll to be a citizen scientist- many programs utilize the community to help track birds, butterflies, etc. Look into Bird Sleuth to track how many birds visit a feeder or migrate through your area.
- Hoof it- if you like to exercise go outside for a run and look for races, bike rides, triathlons, etc. geared toward youth that run trails instead of pounding the pavement.
- Make it a game- create simple scavenger hunts, I spy games, treasure hunts (geocaching), etc. when going for a walk. Or see how many weeds a child can pull in the garden in 1 minute.
- Keep it simple- go for a walk and peer under rocks, under logs, up in the trees. Lie on your back and watch the clouds, close your eyes and feel the sun, smell what is around you, bring a book and have story time outside. Plan to get dirty and just dig in the dirt.

Still not sure what to do? How about you head outside and follow your child, they'll probably be able to lead the way.



I only went out for a walk  
and finally concluded to  
stay out till sundown, for  
going out, I found, was  
really going in. ~John  
Muir, 1913, in L.M. Wolfe,  
ed., *John Muir, John of the  
Mountains: The  
Unpublished Journals of  
John Muir, 1938*