

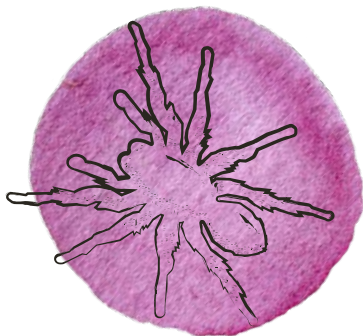
MONICA WIEDEL-LUBINSKI
& KAREN MADIGAN

NATURE PLAY WORKSHOP FOR FAMILIES

A GUIDE TO **40+** OUTDOOR LEARNING
EXPERIENCES IN **ALL SEASONS**



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FOREWORD

Mary Rivkin, PhD

*"It's such a nice day! Let's get the kids outside.
Do something fun as a family!"*

If you have ever said this or something like it, isn't the next sentence about what to do? You start to think what is possible, where is possible, and what is needed besides snacks. Maybe you grew up without playing outdoors much or in a different area where the outdoors had different things to do. This book can help you with what's next.

Monica Wiedel-Lubinski and Karen Madigan are seasoned outdoor teachers of young and elementary children. They have a strong understanding of what the outdoors offers to children for play and interest, and how adults and children can enjoy nature activities together. They also know that in the last 100 years or so, children have had increasingly less time outdoors, and firsthand knowledge about nature has decreased. Thus, parents and children are often beginners together in their nature explorations. This is particularly true in our migratory society, where contemporary families often live far from landscapes familiar to the adults. I observe my son, from Maryland's well-watered green fields and forests, now appreciating the subtle shades of olive, brown, and gray in the shrubs and grasses on the stony hillsides of Southern California. He and his three-year-old child roam trails and meadows, day by day making this their "home" country. "Hear that owl?" one will ask. Or "Where did the tadpoles go?" Child and father are learning together about this rich natural environment.

The authors' extensive teaching experiences are rooted in the mid-Atlantic states, and their deep array of activities reflect this background. Colleagues from other places also have contributed to the array. Every activity has been tested, tried numerous times, enjoyed, and found practical. Not every activity is doable in every location (for example, maple trees require long periods of cold weather to make the sap for maple syrup), yet all the ideas behind them can be widely applied. Some of the activities, such as boiling maple sap, work better with the supervision provided by parents, which is closer than that in a typical class. And often parents like a concrete result from their actions, so numerous activities satisfy that desire, such as the cozy stick houses. Children often are less concerned with making finished products than experimenting with, managing, rearranging, and playing with objects and environments, so activities are advised to those ends as well.

The book has a seasonal organization, but the standard four seasons don't have the same dates everywhere. Winter comes earlier and leaves later in northern parts of the Earth, and thus a gardening project in Maine has to be much more mindful of this short growing season than one in Arizona. Seasons are termed summer, autumn, winter, and spring, but families may learn other names related to their particular environment, such as "hurricane," "planting," or "fishing." And furthermore, as environmentalist in her book *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson noted, "There is

something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.” Young children sensitive to the routines of their individual lives can also tune in to, and find comfort in, nature’s routines. In a graceful touch, Monica and Karen honor the primacy of the seasons with an original poem beginning each section.

The season poems along with many others, both original and well-known, exemplify a theme of this book: **many modes of expression and response to natural phenomena**. Painting, dancing, drawing, writing, building, making and using butterfly wings, fingerplays, singing, inventing, imitating, and caring for things are major observable responses. Sometimes children silently observe and later, sometimes much later, perhaps at bedtime, demonstrate what they have taken in. Notably, in this book, naming things is much less important than noticing, observing, and re-creating through multiple means. Young children are open to learning in many ways—their active minds range quickly over possibilities. If play with others—siblings, parents, friends—can be part of the response, so much the better. Play, with its fun and freedom, brings the concepts, vocabulary, social and motor skills, and other desirables along in its wake. And indeed, the lightness of the authors’ prose underlines this.

A second theme of this book is **nature’s abundance**. Layers of crispy bright leaves invite running, shuffling, flinging, collecting, sorting, and crafting. If a parent shakes a just-ready branch of blossoms over a child, the shower is delighting. Pinecones, fir cones, gleaming chestnuts, sprouting acorns, flying seeds from dandelions, milkweed, thistles. Brown cattail heads packed with seeds. Golden fields of mustard and dandelions. Bushes drooping with sweet berries. Stones, pebbles, gravel, broken shell bits, whole shells. So much

to touch, and finger, and smell, and pinch, and, if irresistible, stash in a pocket. So much to love, really. And different from inside, not needing to be put away. Everything is where it belongs already but can be played with. Snowflakes, raindrops, rainy creeks. Such things are close at hand, but take a look around—how many trees, hills, mountains? Look up, so many clouds changing all the time, in different shapes and sizes. On a clear night, note the abundance of stars, especially in a dark area. Truly there is plenty to go around, to share together, to rejoice in.

Much of the abundance shows visual beauty, even if transitory. Bright leaves turn dull brown, flowers wither, and snowflakes melt. The authors provide ways for children to savor and save beauty through art activities, such as leaf wreaths and sun catchers, and poems help children remember what they have experienced. Beauty is important in education because, as Rachel Carson also wrote, “Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.” When we help children notice beauty, their spirits are nourished.

This is a book to page through, looking for ideas that interest you. Monica and Karen invite you to “take a wander.” Take a wonder too, because there is so much to this world we live in and noticing and cherishing can be a richly rewarding part of your lives.

INTRODUCTION

CULTIVATING NATURE PLAY

Nature play can kindle a lasting love of nature and compassion for other living things. This book celebrates nature and the many playful ways we can explore outdoors with children.





WHAT IS NATURE PLAY?

Simply put, nature play is the freedom for children to explore and play in nature at their whim and in their own way, without adult interference. Children are empowered when they can freely choose how and what to do during nature play. This open-ended approach builds confidence and trust between child and adult. The sensory-rich encounters in nature are curious or strange sometimes, other times exhilarating and unexpected. The intensity of play, the creative scenarios children dream up, and the moments of quiet discovery are enriched by natural materials and settings that can never be replicated or fully experienced indoors.

Although the word *nature* may suggest that nature is a fixed place or a thing, nature is more aptly described as “us.” People, like other animals, are an integral part of nature found in wild habitats and urban settings alike. Nature is not a place we must drive far away to visit; nature is everywhere, and we are a part of it. Time in nature, and specifically nature play, helps children reinforce this essential understanding about what it means to be alive, in and of the earth.

The word *play* as applied here describes the urges, instincts, and interests children naturally have when given the freedom to make their own choices. Play

is the basis for exploring all kinds of learning across cognitive, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and linguistic domains. Play is a universal child passion and, as many of us believe, a sacred right.

Play doesn't require instructions from adults or involve adult narration. Independence, curiosity, problem solving, creativity, resilience, and fun collide in a flurry of learning when children are at play. Children instinctively know how to play and have ideas about what they would like to explore or try to do in any given setting. This is true of play in cultures the world over.

Nature play, like nature, is much more than meets the eye. Nature play opens up a world of possibilities to connect with the land and its history, the complexities of the local ecosystem and its natural resources, the community, and others who explore and play together. Nature play stirs a remembrance inside us, a deep undeniable desire to connect with other living things, no matter how small. Leaf by leaf, children grow their own personal understanding about what it means to be part of nature. Compassion, empathy, kindness, and respect flourish as we live out the interconnectedness of this place we call home.

KEY BENEFITS OF NATURE PLAY

Play is obviously fun and interesting to kids, but some people don't realize the immense learning that happens through play. Our bodies and minds were designed to relate to nature for survival and nature play continues to manifest this basic human instinct. Further, studies show that nature play specifically enhances learning beyond indoor play experiences.

The benefits, listed to the right, multiply the more frequently children engage in nature play. This is not an exhaustive list, as the benefits of nature play are many! Given that the average child spends just 4 to 7 minutes outside, parents and educators alike can strive to provide greater access to nature play so children can benefit from the positive effects on their overall development.



- › Fresh air
- › Exposure to vitamin D from sunshine
- › Exposure to naturally occurring bacteria, *Mycobacterium vaccae*, in soil
- › Improved fine and gross motor development from active physical-play opportunities
- › Understanding of healthy foods and nutritional needs (foraging and edible gardening)
- › Healthy eye development
- › Supported risk taking
- › Improved cognition (high-order thinking and executive functioning skills)
- › Space and time to observe, experiment, and problem solve
- › Direct real-world links to curriculum
- › Stress reduction and calming effects
- › Opportunities to feel and express empathy, compassion, kindness, respect, and gratitude
- › Appreciation for the land, its history, and indigenous cultures
- › Self reflection and perspective taking
- › Spirituality, a sense of belonging, and connectedness
- › Opportunities to experience, process, and integrate sensory input
- › Social and independent play that fosters determination, grit, perseverance, and self confidence
- › Desire to act positively as caretakers who share the natural world and its resources



EMERGENT CURRICULUM AND INTENTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Often referred to as “emergent curriculum,” children naturally stretch their skills as they experience the unpredictable (emergent) aspects of nature and respond based on their evolving interests and needs. Like nature play, emergent curriculum is not directed by adults. Rather, emergent curriculum may be facilitated, observed, and documented by adults who are keen to understand how child development naturally unfolds.

Nature play and emergent curriculum can dovetail with intentional approaches to school curriculum and more traditional forms of learning. For this reason, we have decided to share a balance of playful nature experiences that are paired with activities you and your child can enjoy together. The nature play



*“The child who has cared for another living thing ...
is more easily led to care for his own life.”*

—Friedrich Froebel



experiences have varying degrees of adult interaction (from none to very little), while the projects are more directed and build upon your child’s understanding of seasonal topics.