



By Karen Stephens

Nature Connections for Kids in Cities and Suburbs

Most parents want their children to appreciate, enjoy, and feel comfortable with nature. We hope to rear children who will be wise and responsible when it's their turn to make decisions affecting our blue-green whirling planet. But with over 95% of us raising families in cities, how can we go about connecting kids to nature, much less helping them love it? Well, research and common sense give us the answers.

Adults with a strong attachment to nature invariably say their bonds first took root during childhood. The connection didn't spring from sitting inside reading nature books, watching nature shows, or viewing nature web sites. Research says an emotional connection to nature grows when children have regular opportunities to leisurely explore the natural outdoor world through hands-on, unstructured play. Enjoying the outdoors to their hearts' content is how children learn to love nature. Makes sense to me!

And here's the really encouraging news. Adults with strong bonds to nature say their childhood connections took place within the boundaries of a few neighborhood blocks. So it turns out that parents don't have to live in the country or a forest preserve to raise "green" kids! Adventures and investigations children pursue in empty, overgrown field lots, yards, apartment balconies, community vegetable gardens, cozy city parks, and lakeside beaches seed a lifelong love of nature.

Parents can nurture nature discovery by finding safe ways for children to regularly follow and satisfy their curiosity about the outdoors. When exposed to nature in their daily life, city-raised children are every bit as respectful and compassionate toward the environment as country kids. It's a good thing, too, because ultimately, human survival depends on all of us becoming earth-wise.

Families in the city have added resources to enhance children's nature awareness. Children's zoos, public aquariums, ecology programs, arboretums, public gardens, and natural history museums offer superb nature connections. But remember, added city advantages don't diminish the value of children daily witnessing nature's cycles, patterns, and rhythms as they unfold right outside their own front doors.

Wildlife is especially ingenious when it adapts to human presence. It's amazing how they find novel sources of food, shelter, and warmth in cities and suburbs. Once discovered, nature's creativity will amaze the whole family. Following are ways to lead your kids to nature connections. As you make them, remind the kids that they, too, are miracles of nature.

Bird Spy

Pigeons and sparrows are easily spied at city park picnic tables. Starlings, robins, crows, and wrens are regular city dwellers, too. But look up. Children might spy a peregrine falcon. Falcons love windy, *mountain-like* cityscapes created by groups of tall buildings. Falcons use bridges as artificial perches as they seek prey. Former cliff and cave dwellers, like swallows, swifts, and house martins like the nooks and crannies provided by city buildings, too.

When waiting to cross the street, step aside for a minute. Hold your child's hand and peer closely at the traffic lights. You might see a bird making good use of it! Despite the flashing, birds use traffic lights for nesting or staying out of the rain.

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Even barn owls can be found in the city. They nest under elevated trains and highway overpasses and are active at night. If a northern city airport looks enough like the arctic, a snowy owl might do some hunting there.

Scavenger Hunt

Make a list of nature items children can observe, collect, or even record and sketch, such as: something shaped by the wind (grass, bent street sign, curved snow drift), a seed growing in the sidewalk's crack, a hole in a tree that a squirrel (or even a city raccoon!) might use for a nest, a feather from a blue jay (or other familiar bird), tree with shaggy bark, bird nest, animal tracks, nuts or branches an animal chewed on, leaves, seeds, interesting rocks and sticks, spider's web with dew, and so on.

Collect and Grow Seeds

Anyone can pick up seeds with their fingers, but how about letting the kids use their feet. Place white socks OVER children's shoes. Then have them walk through an over-grown lot that's free of litter. The socks will collect different types of seeds, showing kids that seeds can actually travel. After your walk, look at the seeds up close. What made them stick to the socks? Plant them in a pot of dirt to see what will grow.

Adopt a Family Tree

Find a tree that's close and handy. Watch it regularly. Make rubbings of the tree bark. Collect some leaves and press them between the pages of a heavy book. Make a list of all the wildlife that lives in the tree, including the insects. What parts of the tree are used for food and for shelter? Does the tree produce food people can eat, such as apples or nuts? If so, collect some of it and prepare or share it together. Take photos of the tree during different seasons; especially with your child standing next to it.

Walk in the Rain

Get the poncho and umbrella out and enjoy a stroll in a gentle rain. Breathe in the air. What do the animals do in the rain? Where does the water run when it leaves sidewalks? Follow it. Look at flowers and bushes. Which ones have leaves catching rain? What might drink from the *flower* cups of water later?

Take a Walk to Spy Colors

Sit or stroll outside and find as many different shades of green, yellow, black, or brown as you can.

Listen Up

Sit still outside. Show children how to cup their hands behind their ears. Name all the things you can hear. Are they made by an insect, bird, or mammal? What bird songs can you recognize? Can your child mimic them? Which birds sing in morning, afternoon, or night?

Track It

In snow, or after a good rain, find some animal tracks and follow them. Who made them? Where was it going? How many legs did it have? Was it walking, hopping, or running?

Collect It and Make It

Grab some empty shoeboxes and go find some small nature treasures. Kids can collect nuts, seeds, rocks, feathers, leaves. Once they have a collection of natural materials, kids can glue small items onto construction paper for a nature collage, string seeds for jewelry, or connect leaves for crowns or sashes.

Plant It

Whether it's on a window sill, balcony, or in a community plot, vegetable gardening is a great way to connect kids to nature. Involve them in preparing soil, planting, weeding, watering, harvesting, washing, and cooking (yum!).

Nature Paints

Go to the produce market and pick out berries for homemade watercolors. Blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries do the trick. In a small bowl for each type of berry, place one-half cup of berries and one-fourth cup water. Mash the fruit with a fork. After mashing, strain the juice through a small strainer into a plastic tub, like a clean, empty margarine tub. The strained juice becomes the nature paint. Provide a smock, paper, small watercolor brushes, and a cup of rinse water for the brush. Then let the art begin!

For the Birds

Children can put compassion into practice by making simple bird feeders and bird baths. Peanuts in shells can be strung on string and hung on branches. Pine cones can be stuffed with peanut butter and hung in the same way. A bird bath can be as simple as an aluminum pie plate or a flower pot saucer placed on a stump. A rock in the middle holds it down and gives butterflies a place to land.

Mud Puddle Play

I know, you hate the thought of it, but kids love to play in the sand and mud. The textures are great and the play is relaxing. Kids love trying to float sticks, leaves, and seeds. They like watching leaf and cloud patterns reflected in the water. Mud cakes or sculptures are all part of nature play.

Children's Factual Books about Nature in Cities and Suburbs

- *The Urban Animal: An enlightening and in-depth look at wildlife in the towns and cities of the world* by Barbara Taylor. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2000.
- *Urban Roosts: Where Birds Nest in the City* by Barbara Bash. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books and Little, Brown & Co. of Boston, MA, 1990.
- *Enjoying Chicago Wilderness with Your Family: An Activity Guide*, edited by Judy Pollock. Skokie, IL: Chicago Wilderness Magazine, Inc., 2000.
- *Berries, Nuts, and Seeds: Take-Along Guide* by Diane L. Burns. Minocqua, WI: NorthWord Press, Inc., 1996.
- *Trees, Leaves, and Bark: Take-Along Guide* by Diane L. Burns. Minocqua, WI: NorthWord Press, Inc., 1995.
- *Oak Tree (Webs of Life)* by Paul Fleisher. New York, NY: Benchmark Books, 1998.

Picture Books about Nature in Cities and Suburbs

- *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1941.
- *Come On, Rain!* by Karen Hesse. New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 1999.
- *Flower Garden* by Eve Bunting. New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 1994.
- *Flute's Journey: The Life of a Wood Thrush* by Lynne Cherry. New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc. 1997.
- *The Tiny Patient* by Judy Pederson. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1989.
- *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney. New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1982.

Web Sites to Explore

- National Wildlife Federation for Kids: www.nwf.org/kids/
- Explore! A Child's Nature, Brookfield Zoo: www.brookfieldzoo.org

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.