



Early Literacy Through Nature

Much discussion has occurred lately in the media of the need to reconnect children with nature. Exposing children to the natural world is said to have many benefits, including stimulating the senses, increasing awareness of one's surroundings, improving one's physical health, and instilling a feeling of relaxation and well being. Did you know that sharing nature activities with your toddler and preschooler is also an effective way of developing pre-reading skills? **Here are some simple and fun nature activities to foster early literacy:**

Take your child to a garden center to pick out a flower to take home and plant. At the garden center read out the names of the different flowers. Have fun saying the names out loud and repeating them. This activity will enrich children's vocabulary, making them better readers.

Many children enjoy books about true things. Follow up your child's interest in an aspect of nature by going to the public library and discovering nonfiction books on the topic. This exploration of the collection beyond picture books further increases the child's enjoyment of books and libraries.

Visit a local park or a state park. They often offer easy, short hikes with families in mind. As you are walking along a trail, stop at one of the signs along the way and run your finger under the words as you read out loud. If there is a symbol of an animal or plant, ask the child what he thinks it means. This activity helps the child understand that print is all around us.

Tell your child about nature experiences you had as a child. Your examples may be similar to the following: lake fishing with family in a small boat, taking a hike in the wilderness and seeing a moose and her calf, camping overnight and witnessing a meteor shower. Then take your child on a similar outdoor adventure. When you return home, have the child retell her own experience to other family members. The ability to retell a story is an important skill to learn before going to school.

When walking in a park, play "I Spy." Say, "I spy something near the (pine tree) that is (gray) and rhymes with (funny)." Rhyming is one way that children learn to hear that words are made up of smaller parts. This skill helps them when they later try to sound out words to read.

The letters your child is most likely to be interested in are the letters of their first name. Before exploring the back yard with your child, write out the letters to their name. Then see if both of you can discover things in the yard that begin with each of those letters. For a girl named Emma, discovery examples could include E for earthworm, M for mud, M for maple tree, and A for ant. This is a fun way for children to increase their knowledge of letters.

Your local public library has a great collection of books about nature for children. Be sure to ask your librarian for suggestions.

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