

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *(Re)discovering the Great Outdoors*

**W**E SHOULD ADVERTISE the benefits of being outdoors to our children as intensely as companies market their products and games. How about the goal of making the appeal of nature more compelling to children than anything that appears on a flat screen? That's what David Bond, a father in England, decided to do when he launched Project Wild Thing, a marketing campaign to re-interest children in the outdoors. When he noticed that his three- and five-year-old children would rather play on the iPad than go outside, he designated himself "Marketing Director for Nature" and began making a documentary film about the need for children to spend more time outside. He has also created a pledge for adults to sign, promising to spend more time in nature than they do watching TV.

Many of our most treasured memories of childhood have traditionally been unsupervised play in nature—a pleasure that many children today have rarely experienced. In England there are many agencies working to promote children's free exploration of the outdoors, including websites that describe park areas where children can safely explore nature. Play specialist Kristin Lambert says, "We (people in England dedicated to stimulating children's love of nature) aim for children to experience play that's not set up according to an adult agenda—in forests and open spaces, not designated play areas. There are not specific activities, not fixed equipment; there are tree branches and muddy slopes."

Preschool teachers have often noticed the new tendency of children to prefer indoor play. Yet recent warm weather propelled children out of the classroom, into exuberant outdoor activity. One four-year-old was intensely focused on putting handfuls of wet sand on different parts of a tree. "I'm helping the tree," she said confidently. Watching children in the outdoors is the best reminder of how much nature affects their vitality and sense of well-being.

Parents are always welcome to bring their children to play in our play yards on the weekend, to help in the Seven Circles Garden on Sundays, and to spend time in the Children's Garden after school. The Children's Garden was designed for the kind of carefree experience described above by Kristin Lambert. Adults can't fit into the "magic forest," so children can create their own play agendas with the exhilarating feeling of free exploration.

**(Important—please note:** *Although we want children to experience independence in this garden, we have to ask parents to supervise their children very carefully there, as the "forest" itself is not fenced. Children should always be in view.*)

Here are some ideas for encouraging your child's passion for the outdoors:

- ☞ Create an "alone space" in your yard or on your patio where your child can feel the special solitude of nature.
- ☞ Make fairy houses with your child out of sticks and sand.
- ☞ When children want to stay in, say, "This is the time to be outside." Dr. Benjamin Spock, pediatrician and bestselling author of *Baby and Child Care*, first published in 1946, recommended children spending at least two hours a day outside.
- ☞ Move indoor activities outside whenever possible—place books on a blanket, serve snack on the grass, bring art supplies to the park.

☞ Connect to the changing nature of the outdoors by talking about the phases of the moon, the growth of plants, the lives of animals and bugs.

Since we live in such a beautiful area, parents might imitate the British by scouting out areas where children can safely delight in outdoor exploration, and share that information with one another.

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