

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *Cultivating Children's Love of Nature*

“I WISH MY REDWOOD TREE WOULD BECOME A HUMAN,” a little girl remarked earnestly. “I stand by the tree every day and make that wish.” As she talked, the loving tone in her voice revealed how intimate her relationship with “her” tree has become. It is helpful to remember how we viewed nature when we were children. Do you remember talking to a tree or a flower? Creating a hideout in a secluded place? Feeling astonished by a ladybug scampering over your hand? When asked how they made it through difficult times when they were children, adults often cite their relationship with nature as giving them the support they needed.

Many of us lament not spending as much time in the out-of-doors as we would like. More than that, we wish our children could play outside, losing track of time, the way we did as children.

Parents may find it difficult in today's screen-oriented society to get their children to spend significant periods of time outside. Children and adults who haven't had much experience in the outdoors often feel anxious in open space. A boy playing in a tiny glen next to a street once told me, “It's scary being this far out in nature.” A hike for someone who has spent most of his time indoors can feel threatening.

Summer is the natural portal for offering children the incomparable experience of unstructured time in the natural world. Even if your work week remains the same, the season beckons us to make time for picnic dinners at a park or taking early-evening hikes. Many parents also relax and spend time in our Children's Garden while their children explore the tranquility of the running brook or the exhilaration of venturing into the trees, where adults can't follow. The garden has its own atmosphere, and people seem intoxicated now by the beauty of the plants.

When you're feeling pressured and your child asks to stop in the garden for just a minute, think of the benefits as giving children and yourself a “dose of nature.” Your child may need to greet a plant or a tree that he considers an intimate friend. Learning to be careful of the vegetation is part of cultivating their love and reverence for the outdoors.

This brief excerpt from “The Summer Day” by poet Mary Oliver expresses the luminosity of learning about nature through unfettered time in nature:

I don't know exactly what prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.

Taking a garden stroll with a child can allow us to let go of our overactive minds and sink into the sensory, spiritual world that can offer them nourishment all their lives.

