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Getting outdoors with your preschooler

It's never too early to teach your children about nature

By Stephanie Derammelaere April 29, 2010 06:47 pm

If you've recently taken a walk along the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Cotati or Rohnert Park, you may have come across a group of preschoolers armed with butterfly nets, magnifying glasses, or bug boxes, observing wildlife right in our own backyard.

The children were participating in "nature discovery class" through Nature Tots, a nonprofit organization that started in 2008. The classes were started to cultivate "a love of nature of our youngest citizens, through direct exposure to the outdoors and by encouraging and facilitating their innate curiosity of the natural world."

While the classes are a great way for young children and their parents to get outdoors and learn about the nature in their own community, founder Stephanie Derammelaere is quick to point out that you don't need a class to introduce nature to your child.

"Almost all children seem to be born with an innate curiosity and wonder of the natural world," says Derammelaere. "Every spider, rock, and tree can capture a child's attention and imagination."

Derammelaere starts with a few suggestions for parents wanting to get children outdoors and excited about discovering nature:

Slow down your pace

Let your preschooler take the lead and stop with them to observe that leaf, insect, or rock they find so interesting. What may seem mundane to us can be riveting to a young child and by allowing them the time to be mesmerized by an object, we sometimes reawaken our own wonder of nature.

"In the Nature Tots classes we sometimes have to keep the nature walk on schedule, to get back on time to do our craft and so forth," said Derammelaere, "but I encourage parents to take walks with their children without a certain destination or schedule in mind. You may only walk half a block but young children learn by simply observing the world around them. Our current lifestyle can be so hurried, many children (and adults) don't have time to appreciate the beauty around them."

Change your child's perspective

Give your child a magnifying glass, a pair of binoculars, or a butterfly net to try out on your next excursion. These can help foster your child's observation skills and help them see nature from a different perspective. Encourage them to use their magnifying glass underneath a leaf or log, or peer into tree branches with the binoculars to see what birds are perching there.

"Children love being little 'scientists' and giving them observation tools will encourage them to make discoveries. Make sure the tools aren't distracting - you don't want it to be about the 'stuff' - but as long as they are using one thing at a time in the appropriate way, it can be exciting for them to see things in different perspectives."

Let them get dirty

Sometimes to really enjoy nature you just have to be in it. "One of the best walks I ever took with my children was to Crane Creek one rainy day last winter," says Derammelaere. "It didn't take long to find out that my children's rubber boots and slickers were no match for the deep puddles on the trail that day. While my first reaction was 'oh, don't get too muddy!' I let go of the urge to keep my kids clean and we had a blast 'making music' (tap dancing) in the puddles! My children returned home with mud from head to toe, yet while the mud can be washed off, that great memory will last for a long time. Now I'm always prepared with extra outfits in the car."

The easiest way to enjoy nature with your children? Just get outside! Children really don't require much - you don't need to take a trip to Yosemite to take their breath away. The beauty of a snail shell, a colorful autumn leaf or an intricate spider web is not lost on our youngest naturalists.

For more information or to sign up for Nature Tots' free e-newsletter for nature activity ideas, eco-tips for kids, and other nature-related community events, e-mail stephanie@naturetots.com, call (707) 333-1331 or visit www.naturetots.org.



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The logo features a red starburst symbol to the left of the letters 'CBD'. Each letter is contained within a square frame. The 'C' frame contains the words 'CONSULTING', 'MARKETING', 'SALES', and 'FINANCIAL'. The 'B' frame contains 'BUSINESS', 'OPERATIONS', 'MANAGEMENT', and 'TRAINING'. The 'D' frame contains 'DEVELOPMENT', 'LEGAL', 'REGULATORY', and 'COMPLIANCE'. The entire logo is set against a dark background within a light-colored rectangular border.