



by Karen Stephens

Children Honor Mother Nature When Exploring Spring

Spring is such a life-affirming season. The natural world bursts with sensory delights. It's the perfect time to broaden your child's outdoor horizons! Not yet jaded by age or boredom, children relish spring's tantalizing sights and sounds. They don't take small miracles for granted — a priceless lesson they can teach us!

Children's curiosity sets a concentrated bead on changes that erupt in spring. Take advantage of their natural interest and guide their senses to boundless nature learning. Savor the enchantment spring has to offer and your child's intellect will take over from there. Refresh yourself by spying spring anew through your children's eyes; it's one of the best perks of parenting!

Spring Adventures to Savor

1. Take leisurely walks. Even in urban areas, Mother Earth dons a lovely spring cloak.
2. Bring a magnifying glass on walks; moss, lichen, and bird tracks are teeny! Binoculars are handy on walks, because some signs of spring, like migrations of geese, are sometimes far away.
3. Carry paper sacks, grocery bags, or backpacks. Kids endlessly bend and stoop during walks to collect and save spring treasures. A litter bag is a great idea, too!
4. Take along a bug cage so creepy, crawly critters (like insects and worms) can be eyeballed up close. After a few hours of observation, release creatures back to the wild; insects and worms are a primary source of protein for many spring birds!
(You can make a homemade bug cage: Clean two empty tuna fish cans, smooth edges from opened end. Roll a square foot of screen from the hardware store into a cylinder shape so the ends overlap. Slip the open end of each can onto each end of the screen cylinder. Put a stick inside the cage for insects to climb. Nature stores sell bug bottles that even have a built-in magnifier in the top!)
5. Take a tape recorder to the backyard or on walks. Kids can make a "Sounds of Spring" tape to be played during nap or bedtime.
6. Watch the comings and goings of birds during their busiest time of year! Set up homemade or purchased bird feeders and bird baths in your back yard. The all-time best bird feed is sunflower seeds, but there are other good feeds, too. Chickadees and woodpeckers like peanuts, orioles like halved oranges and grape jelly, titmice and nuthatches like suet, goldfinches like thistle. Have kids determine your birds' tastes!
7. After grooming pets, have kids collect shedded fur to throw in the back yard. Keep an eye out for a smart bird absconding with the fur to line her brood's nest.
8. Visit school butterfly gardens. Take along a sketch pad and some colored pencils to encourage kids to focus on detail.
9. Stroll with the kids along nature trails in woods or parks. You'll see sights you miss when power-walking.
10. Include kids in planting gardens to entice butterflies, bees, and birds (and yes, even slimy slugs) to your yard. Libraries have books on the how-to's of bird and butterfly flower gardening!

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11. Take a camera or a camcorder on some walks. Cameras help children focus on particulars, and they help children recall the experience in the future. A disposable camera lets your child be a nature photographer!
12. Provide a bulletin board where signs of spring can be mounted. Let them start a scrapbook of flower petals, leaves, or bird feathers. Ask them to arrange dinner table centerpieces from treasures they find on walks.
13. After collecting nature items, let kids sort them into containers. Boxes with bottle-separator inserts work well, as do shoe boxes. Plastic storage containers fishermen use to sort sinkers, fish hooks, and line flies are ideal for scavenged nature items.

Child Explore Spring With their Senses

Savor the Scents: Breathe deeply, smell the warming earth. Let the kids dig in the dirt or plant flowers to get their fill of springtime aromas. Find spring flowers, shrubs, and trees with scents: viburnum, lilac, may apples, even tulips. Blooming crab apple trees offer an exquisite perfume. Don't forget our most common plant — grass. It smells heavenly after shearing. Walk with umbrellas in a light rain; the shower washing away winter's residue is a gift we can feel, watch, and smell!

Spy Patterns and Designs: Delicate fern fronds unfurling, leaves sprouting through mulch, ever-widening ripples in mud puddles, bird feather designs, meandering muddy earthworm trails, flags and windsocks nodding to the beat of the wind, runnels of rainwater weaving a trek to street gutters, the V of migrating geese, spiders webbing, and perhaps the most majestic design — a rainbow, are fascinating to behold.

Trace Textures: Encourage kids to gently touch satiny tree buds, fuzzy pussy willows, silky flower petals, moist maple leaves, sippy sod, mushy mud, dewdrops, and the craggy bark of hardwood trees. Hold still as spring breezes caress kids' cheeks and hair!

Tune into Sounds: Sit quietly and listen to geese honking, rain tapping a roof-top dance, thunder raging, wind spinning, birds singing territorial and mating songs, chicks begging for food, and the endless buzz of insects fresh from spring hatching.

Watch Wildlife Behavior: Watch migratory songbirds carry spring to your doorstep! Observe mating rituals, such as the dutiful male cardinal feeding the female. Spy robins searching for worms. Observe a bird building a nest. Record dates eggs appear and then the babies. Note what the birds are fed and by which parent. Mark fledging dates when birds leave the nest. Diligent kids can track a bird's whole development!

And there are other springtime bird antics to watch. Male redheaded woodpeckers put on dramatic mock battle aerial displays competing for mates. In wooded areas, you may view the circular glides of hawks bonding; the sight will leave you awestruck!

Hike along the river and you might chance upon a heron skimming the river's surface; the big birds resemble pterodactyls! Scour sandbars for heron's three-toed tracks. Measure them; they're much bigger than the bird tracks the kids spy at home.

And this is the time to keep an eye peeled for Mother Earth's most endearing new inhabitants — those darling baby rabbits, raccoons, deer mice, opossum, skunks, fox, ducks and woodchucks, and on and on.

So what are you waiting for? Grab the kids, get out of the house and enjoy this most sensory of seasons! There's no better way to honor Mother Nature! You'll be planting a love in your child's heart that will last a lifetime.

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

- Nature Connection for Children related articles #1, #2, #3, #4, #6, #7, #8

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. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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