

NATURE PLAY RESOURCES



WHAT IS NATURE PLAY?

It is experiencing, exploring, and connecting with the natural world through play activities. Nature Play builds connections between children and nature and strengthens family and social bonds between children and their adults.

WHY IS NATURE PLAY IMPORTANT?

Children who play in nature, guided by a caring and trusted adult, are more likely to grow up and stay connected with wildlife and wild spaces. Early positive experiences with the natural world help create and strengthen life-long bonds between people and places. It also helps engage multiple senses, supports curiosity and creativity, and trying new things, which are all critically important for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Here are a few ideas to help you engage your children in Nature Play at home, throughout the year. You can also play at the zoo by visiting Hasbro's Our Big Backyard nature play space. It is open every day the zoo is open, year-round.

Please note: Supervision required; participation encouraged!



OUTDOOR IDEAS:

AUTUMN

- Bring children's activities outside. Read a story, play with blocks or figurines, cars and trucks, or even a board game can all be played in the great outdoors! Spend time doing "inside" things outdoors.
- Rake leaves, trim trees, more fun please! Children find excitement in tasks which adults may view as tedious. Raking leaves creates opportunities to run, jump, and use hand-eye coordination.
- Trimmed branches from trees can be used to build, sort, and stack. Let your child's imagination be their guide.
- No yard? No problem! A stroll down the sidewalk or visit to a local park provides access to leaves, fallen branches, and dropped seed pods. Count, color, and collect a few interesting items for further exploration.

WINTER

- Spot animal tracks in the snow or frost. Imagine how animals move based on the footprints you find. Try to recreate the animal's path through your yard, along the sidewalk, or at the local park.
- Build a snow sculpture. It could be a classic snowman shape, or something completely different. Work together with your child and let their imagination guide you.



OUTDOOR IDEAS:

SPRING

- Dance party! Honeybees do a special “dance” in the hive to let other bees know where to find flowers. The bees walk in a figure eight pattern and wiggle their bodies to communicate distance and direction to flowers for their fellow hive mates. Can you dance like a bee? Give it a try!
- Turn yardwork into playtime. Help get the garden ready. Rake out old leaves left over from autumn. Dig holes to loosen soil. What did you find in the ground...earthworms, rocks, pills bugs?
- No garden? No problem! Small scale planting can be done with a window flower box, or with a few cinder blocks on the ground filled with soil. Let kids help and be part of the process.
- Bring children’s activities outside. Read a story, play with blocks or figurines, cars and trucks, or even a board game can all be played in the great outdoors! Spend time outside doing “inside” things outdoors.

SUMMER

- Ice cubes and a bowl of water create differences in temperature for children to feel. As the ice melts it changes shape and will eventually “disappear”. Play and science happening at the same time!
- Make music, sing, and dance – Get your entire body moving. Cue up your favorite song and let the music move you. Put your hands in the air and wave them like you just don’t care.
- Puddle Play – after a summer rainfall, go outside and jump in some puddles! Even small puddles on the sidewalk provide opportunities for children to jump and splash.



INDOOR IDEAS:

AUTUMN

- As leaves fall off trees, bring some inside. Sort leaves by size, shape, and color.
- Try making art by placing a blank paper over a leaf, then rub the paper with a crayon to reveal the ridges and textures of the leaf.

SPRING

- Collect small sticks and branches that broke off during winter storms. Does your child want to build something with them? Try sorting the sticks by size, or texture, or color. Create an art project by gluing/tying the sticks into different shapes.
- Try building a “nest” or “den” out of toys/items from around the house. What kind of animal might want to use what you built?

WINTER

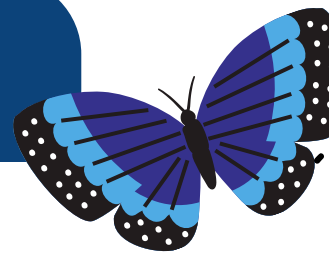
- After a snowfall, collect some snow in a bowl, dish, or cooking pan and bring it inside. Make a mini snowman but work quickly before the snow melts.
- Use food coloring to create art with snow as your “canvas”. Watch what happens to the colors as the snow melts.

SUMMER

- Too hot to play outside? Stay indoors and try some imaginative play. Use what you have at home to create a pretend habitat.
- Find a few small rocks and paint them to create something new!



NATURE PLAY FAQ'S/CONCERNS:



Will I get dirty/messy?

- Sometimes. Activities that involve digging, painting, or water may result in a little mess. However, planning for some clean-up can help you and your child enjoy the mess when you make it.

Is it dangerous?

- There is a difference between taking a healthy risk and being hazardous or dangerous. Trying new things, and sometimes failing, is critically important for a child's development. Please be mindful of things like tripping hazards, sharp objects, and unsupervised play, but don't let fear keep you and your child from trying something new.



What if I don't have access to a private yard?

- A public sidewalk or nearby park can be an option, as well as playing at a friend or relative's home. A visit to the zoo, especially on "Free First Saturday's" (for Providence residents), is another alternative. The zoo also partners with local area libraries to offer reduced admission zoo passes that can be checked out with your library card (ask your library if they participate).

What is Nature Swap?

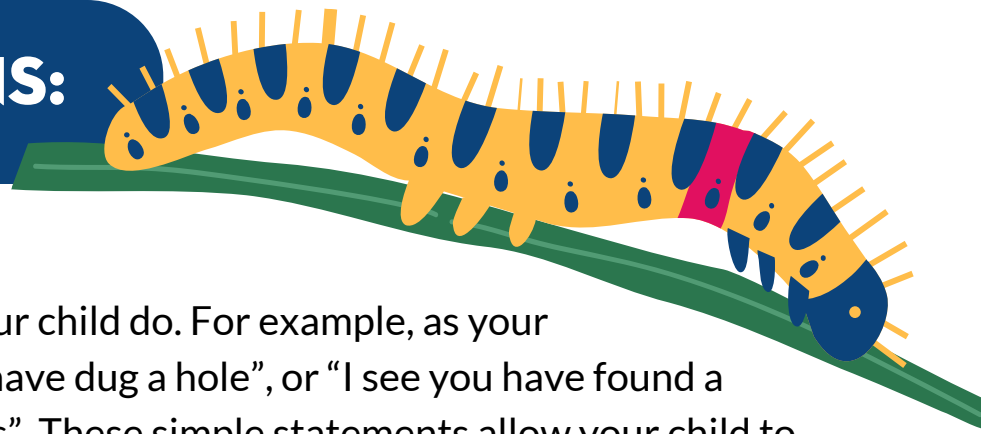
- The Nature Swap, located within the Hasbro's "Our Big Backyard" play space, is a special place to trade items that you've collected when out exploring in nature. To participate in Nature Swap, bring in natural "found" items to collect points for swapping with items in our collection. You can trade things commonly found in nature like shells, rocks, acorns, leaves, or pinecones.

Where can I learn more about the benefits of Nature Play?

- Visit us at Hasbro's Our Big Backyard nature play space at Roger Williams Park Zoo to speak with staff and trained volunteers who can share more information.
- *More suggested resources/readings are noted on last page.*



NATURE PLAY FAQ'S/CONCERNS:



What if I don't know much about animals or nature?

- Try “play narration”. In simple terms, say what you see your child do. For example, as your child is digging in the backyard you can say “I notice you have dug a hole”, or “I see you have found a bunch of rocks”, or “I notice you have made a pile of sticks”. These simple statements allow your child to tell you more about their ideas. You might be surprised at how their imagination transforms these things into new suggestions for play.
- Use open ended questions. These are questions that do not have a “right” or “wrong” answer. Instead of telling your child how to play with an object, you can ask them what to do with the item. For example, try “what should we do with this?”, or “what do you think?”, or “where can this go?”. Let your child guide the play activity with their thoughts and imagination.
- Learn more together. There is so much to learn about animals, plants, and nature. If a question comes up and you don't know the answer, tell your child you can learn about it together. Try “Googling” it to find out more or visit your local library and read about it together.

Does a parent/guardian have to participate?

- Yes! A key part of nature play is the presence of a trusted and caring adult. Children who spend time in nature with a caring adult are more likely to care about nature and animals when they grow up. The experiences of being in nature as a child create memories that help form their “ecological identity”. This is how children see themselves as part of the natural world.
- Be present. Remove distractions like cell phones and video games from your attention. Whenever possible, actively engage with your child instead of sitting on the “sidelines”. Show your child you care by being present and in the moment with them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Website:** Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium (aza.org)
- **Website:** Nature Swap at Roger Williams Park Zoo (www.natureswap.rwpzoo.org)
- **Website:** Urban Gardening in Rhode Island Gardening Resources (uri.edu)
- **Website:** Children and nature Network Resource Hub | Children & Nature Network (childrenandnature.org).
- **Book:** Last Child in the Woods - Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder by: Richard Louv
- **Article:** (PDF) The 95 percent solution: School is not where most Americans learn most of their science (researchgate.net)

