

The Great Outdoors is Nature's Playground

By Beth Stein

From climbing trees to skipping stones, nature provides children with an amazing array of “playground equipment” and “toys,” all free for the using and enjoying. Anyone who has ever explored outside with a child has certainly observed how creative kids can be in natural environments with natural objects.

On your next outdoor adventure, help your child's “natural” fun last even longer by trying some of the following simple nature games and activities. Most can easily be modified to suit a wide range of ages and locations. Many are adapted from a couple of excellent nature activity books by Joseph Cornell, *Sharing Nature with Children* and *Sharing the Joy of Nature*.

Rainbow Collecting – Cut up some paint sample cards from the hardware store and have kids try to find all of the colors of the rainbow in nature, one color at a time. Try this in a wildflower field or on the trail to keep kids moving along.

The Sound Wheel – A great activity for helping children slow down or get focused, have your kids close their eyes and hold up one finger for each new sound they hear. When they open their eyes, have them share what they have heard. Have them try to imitate bird calls or buzzing insects.

Scavenger Hunts – A classic that kids will always enjoy, create a scavenger hunt that includes natural objects you might find in the area you're exploring. Make the game challenging by asking kids to use their senses and imaginations. For example, ask them to look for something that smells good, something that a squirrel might eat, something a bird might use to build a nest, or something that flies in the wind but has no wings.

Find Your Rock – If you're in a rocky area, ask your kids to collect about ten rocks and put them in a pile. Then have each child take a turn choosing a rock with his or her eyes closed. Have the child get to know the rock's shape, texture, and size (eyes still closed), put the rock back in the pile, and then try to pick it out of the group, eyes open! Be sure to return your natural treasures to their places when you're done collecting.

Ant Hikes – A great game for getting children to really pay attention to their surroundings. Have your kids imagine they are tiny ants who are going on a hunt for tiny ant-sized treasures. Bring along some empty film canisters or other small containers to use as treasure boxes. When the “ant hike” is over, have kids share their miniature collections. Again, return your treasures to nature when you're done collecting.

Beth Stein is the director of Nearby Nature, a non-profit education group in Eugene dedicated to fostering appreciation of nature nearby and providing tools for ecological living. Nearby Nature is based in Alton Baker Park and hosts summer daycamps, nature walks, school programs, special events, and volunteer projects in local natural areas.

For more information or to register for daycamps, call 541-687-9699 or visit www.nearbynature.org.