



# **10 WAYS TO GET YOUR KIDS OFFSCREEN AND OUTDOORS**

a FREE eBook by



# ABOUT THIS eBook

Hello there! This FREE e-book is aimed at parents, teachers and activity leaders who are looking for ways to get their kids away from the screen (whether it's a game console, a mobile phone or the TV) and out into the wilds of nature – even if it's just the back garden. Hey, why not start small and build from there.

We've got **10 top tips** for you to try, which have been proven to work. You can check them out in brief on the next page. Not every trick will work for every child, we're all individuals, so try them out, mix them up, let us know how you get on. We'd love to hear from you.

In Richard Louv's bestselling book *Last Child In The Woods* he explores the growing problem of what he coins as Nature-Deficit Disorder and the growing trend of our children being increasingly isolated from the outdoor-centered childhood experiences that many of us remember and cherish from our own youth. Louv tells us;

**“the child in nature is an endangered species, and the health of children and the health of the Earth are inseparable.”**

We don't yet know the full long-term implications of these screen-centered lives that many children are leading these days.

**“For a whole generation of kids direct experiences in the back yard, in the tool shed, in the fields and woods has been replaced by indirect learning, through machines. These young people are smart, they grew up with computers, they were supposed to be superior – but now we know that something's missing.”**

Frank Wilson (cited in *Last Child In The Woods*)

But we don't need to convince you that too much time in front of the screen is not healthy for your child, that's why you're reading this e-book. We're here to give you some practical help, so let's get started.



## Who We Are

Our names are James and Lea. We are experienced forest school leaders and outdoor educators working in the UK with not only children but also young people and groups of adults, where we engage them in a range of activities through the Woodland Classroom. You can find out more about how to find us online at the end of this book.

But if you can't wait that long... just click [here](#).

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# OUR TOP 10 TIPS...

- 1. Bring the Outdoors In**
- 2. Just Add Water**
- 3. Get Muddy**
- 4. Change YOUR Routine**
- 5. Embrace the Enemy**
- 6. Light Fires**
- 7. Enjoy Food**
- 8. Unlock the Tool Shed**
- 9. Build Dens**
- 10. Go With the Craze**



Along with each of these ideas we're going to give you several ways to put them into action along with ideas for taking each theme further. Let's begin...



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## I. Bring the Outdoors In

It is important to start in the smallest way possible to start building your child's interest in nature. **Put plants around your home** and especially where your children sit and play video games or watch TV. It can be a subtle reminder of the natural world and its calming influence on us. Your kids don't need to directly engage at first, just plant things strategically around them to stimulate their senses or to sink into their subconscious minds even when they seem oblivious.

Some plants will actually improve the air quality around your home, some of these include: mother-in-law's tongue, peace lily, spider plant, bamboo, dracaena or money plant. Just explain to your child that you are putting these plants around to detoxify the air. This will start to get them thinking about the positive effects of nature.

Another idea is to **get a bird feeder** that uses suction to attach to glass. Put this on your child's bedroom window or near where they play their video games. If the birds take to it, it will be a regular interruption from the screen and a friendly reminder to go outside. How could anyone get angry at being interrupted by a little bird?

Get a tank and **bring frogspawn into the house** to watch the tadpoles grow. Maybe keep a diary of their activities and development. Be responsi-



ble and do your research around caring for the frogspawn. There's plenty of information online. Always be ready to put them back in the place you found it before the froglets get too big.

**Try growing cress, broccoli shoots or herbs** on the kitchen window sill and always add it to their sandwiches or meals when appropriate.

The outdoor survival expert Bear Grylls is extremely popular with many young people. Why not stick him on your television in the background of your child's usual activity and notice if it entices them away from the computer. It maybe another screen, but it's a start. **Celebrities and characters like Bear can inspire kids** to enact their own wild adventures. Watching programmes like this gets them used to the concept of adventure and fun in the great outdoors.

### Taking It Further

This might seem a bit crazy at first but why not go to the other extreme and take the great indoors, outdoors? Take a sofa and other furniture into the garden on a nice day. Get set up and comfortable – have fun. You're only limited by your imagination and kids will be full of great ideas.

**2. Just Add Water.** Water is a great way to engage children. If it's warm enough, get the garden hose out. Spray the window where your child is to get their attention if you have to. Most children won't be able to resist. You can then use the garden hose creatively to make a water slide, fountain, or try making your own rainbows.

You could try going pond dipping to see what underwater creatures you can find. All you need is a plastic tray (white is best) and something to scoop the pond-life up in whether it's a small net or a fine sieve from your kitchen. Don't worry about not knowing how to identify the creatures you find, often it's more fun making up names than looking up the real ones. Use your imagination. And of course, be sure to carefully put back anything you find, where you found it. Happy hunting!

### Taking It Further

How about making a miniature pond in your garden? This is one of the best things you can do to encourage wildlife, as it creates a micro-habitat. You don't need to splash out (excuse the pun) with an expensive pond liner. Use an old plastic tray or dig a hole and use some kind of flexible plastic bag as a liner, it doesn't have to last forever! Fill the hole with water and rocks and surround with old logs to make it aesthetically pleasing and allows creatures to get in and out of the water. A pond will be a haven for bugs too, which kids can spend hours being fascinated by. Keep an eye out in spring to see if any frogs choose to lay their spawn in your new pond.

Where you've got water in the outdoors, you've usually got mud. Which brings us to...



**3. Get Muddy!** Mud, mud, glorious mud! Dig a hole, fill it with water and give full permission to your child to get as muddy as they like. Mud pies can be made, mud kitchens are a lot fun, mud sculptures get kids being creative. Mud can also be used to create faces on tree trunks when used like clay. The phrase "getting dirty" carries many negative associations in our modern urbanized lifestyle, but so many kids love being dirty and being allowed to let loose with mud. We should show them that it's okay to be dirty.



### Taking It Further

Have you ever tried building with mud? Our ancestors did it and some people in hot climates still live in mud brick houses today. Get online and have a look at the following traditional building techniques: Wattle & Daub, Mud Bricks and Cob. Perhaps you'll be inspired to start your own mud build project?

## 4. Change YOUR Routine

This is where you can lead by example. There are lots of subtle tricks you can use by changing your habits. Not only will your child be enticed outdoors through your encouragement but you're also going to reap the rewards for yourself – a win, win situation! Here's some ideas to get you thinking →

When trying all these things, become aware of any differences that occur in you while implementing these small changes in your life and share them with your family.

So, tell us what worked for you. Have you discovered a behavior change that really got your kids into nature? Share it with us on our website or facebook page. We'd love to hear about it.

[www.facebook.com/woodlandclassroom](http://www.facebook.com/woodlandclassroom)

### Taking It Further

Well, if you want to change your routine even further, the question is "how far do you want to go?" We'd recommend seeing what your child has responded to and then build on that behavior change. It might lead to joining up a local nature group, visiting more outdoor spaces or attending wildlife-themed events.



Take your family **meals outside**. If the weather permits eat outdoors as often as possible.

Take time out to go out into the garden or yard each evening and say, "I'm just going to go and **look at the stars.**"

Put a **birdfeeder up in the garden** and regularly feed the birds.

Bring your outdoor experiences into **family conversation**, see if you can get your children to ask questions.

Lay a blanket out on the grass and choose to rest there instead of on the sofa.

Dropping lots of hints and repetition about nature and your outdoor experiences will sink into your **child's awareness** with persistence.

Take **regular walks** and if you can walk to the shop instead of driving.

If you're in the park or on a walk – **take an ID field guide with you** and match up what you see with the guide. In the UK, the FSC (Field Studies Council) produce some great fold out guides which have big pictures, are splash proof and best of all they're affordable.



If your child seems to have their head constantly in their phone then use this to your advantage. Encourage them to go out and take photos of interesting natural objects or scenes. Get interested in how good their camera is and what its capabilities are. What can your child achieve with it?

You could make some genuine reasons for them to get some great nature photos. Perhaps you need a beautiful picture to make a greeting card or you want a new desktop image for your computer? What can they come up with?

## 5. Embrace the Enemy

In the war against electronic entertainment versus the great outdoors, it might be a smart idea to not only know your enemy, but to embrace it! **We're talking about the mobile phone** here. You could harness the power of what it can do to inspire your child to get out into nature.

Think about it. The phone is also a camera, a video recorder, a dictaphone. There are also many nature-based apps out there designed for kids which get them exploring with their phone acting as a digital guide. Species I.D. and star-gazing are just two of the many activities that great apps have been written for. A lot of these apps are also free!



This is just one way to harness technology to give them that subtle shove out the door and to take an interest in the all things green - even if it is through a screen; it's a positive start.

### Taking It Further

If this has really worked for you, then maybe you could eventually swap their camera phone for a proper camera. This way, you're encouraging their interest further.

Another progression you could try is the phenomenon of Geocaching. This is treasure hunting using the GPS abilities of your mobile phone. Go ahead, look it up.

## 6. Light Fires

In our experience, children LOVE fire! Letting your child build and light their own fire will get them outside and off the computer for sure!

The effects of fire have a hypnotic quality and people young and old are drawn to it. There doesn't need to be any kind of activity just the general maintenance of the fire is often enough. We've found the kids really enjoy simply burning sticks and making glowing embers.

There is something very primeval about fire and it ignites something within us that keeps us focused, alert and mesmerized.

You don't have to be Grizzly Adams to get a great campfire going. We recommend this basic kit (made up of everyday household items) which gives kids a sure chance at success.



### Homemade Fire Kit

**Newspaper • Vaseline • Cotton Wool  
Matches**

*(best to store it all in a plastic tub to keep the damp away)*

Here's our tips on how to build a fire successfully and safely:

The first thing to do is to ensure that you have located the fire site in a suitable and safe position. Fires should be away from low hanging branches, with clear space around them to avoid uncontrolled spreading. Don't light a fire against an existing trunk as this will damage the tree.

**Step 1:** Scrape the chosen fire site to bare earth.

**Step 2:** Gather plenty of kindling and fuel which is required to light the fire and to keep it lit for the tasks you need for the session ahead. Fuel can be split into the following categories:

**Fine Kindling** – sticks thicker than a match but

thinner than a pencil. Brittle dry. Gather plenty as this is what you need to get the fire going.

**Kindling** – Brittle-dry wood of pencil thickness. Broken into pieces a hand width long. Good for controlling heat quickly within the fire when cooking. Gather plenty.

**Small Fuel** – Thicker than a pencil but not thicker than your thumb.

**Main Fuel** – Sticks thicker than your thumb but can be broken over your knee. For most campfires, this is the largest fuel you'll need.

**Step 3:** Make a platform using main fuel sticks to build your fire on. This lifts the fire off the cold/damp ground and lets air in from below.

**Step 4:** Time for your Homemade Fire Kit. Twist the newspaper into strips. Tease out the cotton wool so it's even finer and then smear some Vaseline onto the patch of wool that you're going to set the match to. Vaseline is petroleum jelly so will act as our 'firelighter.' Lay all this material together on your platform – this is your tinder.

**Step 5:** Take two handfuls of fine kindling and lay them overlapping the tinder.

**Step 6:** Light the Vaseline-smearred tinder with a match.

**Step 7:** Once the flame has taken, position the kindling into the flame and let it catch. When the flames burn through, add the next size fuel up and continue this until you are burning main fuel.

**Step 8:** Get the campfire sing-along-songbook out. Or maybe a ghost story.



You can use the cold charcoal to draw with or even better let the kids go wild and cover their faces in tribal face paint.

When you're all done with your fire then remember the old saying which goes "leave only footprints, take only memories." So if you're out in the wild, try to leave no trace on the ground of your fire. The easiest way to do this is to soak the coals and ashes, stir them up and then scatter them to the four winds. Check the ground at the fire site is cool and then cover with dead leaves and other woodland material. Job done! This also teaches best practice to your little ones.

### **Taking It Further**

If your kids have mastered this method of firelighting then you can make it more difficult. Start taking away the newspaper, cotton wool or Vaseline. See if your little pyromaniacs can rise to the challenge of finding a natural alternative for tinder. Dry bracket fungus, dry moss, all kinds of natural tinder can be found. Let them experiment.

The campfire has always been a draw to people young and old and cooking on the fire even more so. Which brings us neatly to.....

## **7. Enjoy food 😊**

Do you remember picking blackberries from the hedgerow? A great way to engage kids in nature is through their stomach! Children from our Forest School are always asking when we'll next be cooking marshmallows or popcorn over the fire. Here's some simple ideas on how to find wild food or cook on an open fire to draw your kids outside.

### **Damper Bread**

We've had a lot of fun making damper bread over the campfire, as it's quick, simple and kids love it. We've been amazed at how positively kids respond to this food, even though it's mostly flour and water. What this shows is that it's their experience of cooking on the campfire that they really respond to. You don't need complicated recipes with expensive ingredients to get kids hooked.

#### **Ingredients (enough for 10 dampers)**

- 4 cups self raising flour
- 1½ cups water (or milk)
- ½ teaspoon of salt

You'll need some green sticks (hardwood is best) that will need to be about as long as your arm and as thick as your little finger. By



'green' we mean sticks that are freshly cut so they're not dry and less liable to catch light over the fire.

#### **Method**

1. Mix the ingredients into a soft, light dough by adding the liquid to the flour slowly, constantly mixing with a knife, then knead for 5 minutes.
2. Divide the dough into balls slightly larger than a golf ball.
3. Strip the sticks of their bark with a knife to en-

sure they're clean.

4. Work each portion of the dough onto the end of a stick in the shape of a sausage, making sure to cover the end of the stick.

5. Cook each damper over the embers, turning constantly so as not to burn. After about 15-20 minutes, the damper should be golden on the outside and have doubled in size.

6. Remove the damper from the stick, break it open and add your own topping; jam, butter, honey or anything you like. Enjoy!

### Wild Tea

Try making your very own herbal teas or "woody waters" as our Forest School group call it. All you need is a cafetiere. It's a great excuse to go for a walk in nature, get kids looking closely at the plants around them and dip your toe into the wonderful world of wild food and foraging. You'll be pleased to hear that the plants you're looking for are easy to find and identify.

#### Nettles • Goosegrass • Dandelion • Mint

Picking nettles without getting stung can be tricky but a great trick to impress kids once you've mastered it. Most of the stinging hairs are on the top of the leaves so grab the plant by the bottom of the leaves or the stem. Of course, you can always use gloves if you want to be extra safe. The tastiest parts of the nettle are the young tops. Once you've got enough nettle leaves place them in to the cafetiere, pour on hot water (which you'll be pleased to hear also eliminates the sting) and leave to brew for a few minutes before pushing the plunger and serving up.

For a sweeter brew, try adding some mint leaves and even the fussiest eater should enjoy the refreshing tea especially if they have foraged for the leaves and made it for themselves.

Everyone knows the dandelion, and when in flower they're easy to spot. The petals have a sweet taste to them, like liquid sunshine. You

can also eat the leaves, though they're quite bitter – give it a go.

Experiment with different combinations of nettle, dandelion petals, goosegrass and mint – see which recipe you like best.



### WHAT'S GOOSEGRASS?

Goosegrass is just one of many names for that plant that we all used to stick to each-other as kids. Also known as Sticky Weed, Cleavers, and in parts of Wales they call it Cackey Monkey (spelt Caci Mwnci in Welsh) all parts of the plant can be added to your wild tea.

### Marshmallows & Popcorn

We've already mentioned these and both are sure winners, easy to do and great fun on an open fire too. For popcorn, all you need is to create a 'bowl' with two sieves tied with wire onto a long stick. Kids will love to watch the popcorn bounce to life over the fire. If you're toasting marshmallows, try this challenge. Peel off a toasted layer of marshmallow then re-toast. How many layers can you get out of one marshmallow? Our group's record is 15!

### Taking It Further

The sky's the limit when it comes to wild food, foraging and campfire cooking. There is a wealth of resources out there online and in books to get you inspired. Bon appétit!

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## 8. Unlock the Tool Shed

In our experience, kids love knives, axes, saws and loppers – anything sharp really. So let's get using them.

Learning how to use sharp tools safely is an **extremely important life skill**. We feel children should begin learning from a young age and it's something we teach a lot at the Woodland Classroom. In Scandinavia where Forest Schools have been running since the 1950's nursery aged children begin with relatively safe eating knives and then progress from there as they grow in age and confidence.



If you've never used an axe or whittled wood with a knife yourself then I wouldn't expect you to just hand these tools straight to a child, so take some time to get confident with them enough yourself so you can work with your child to use the tools or get someone involved who is tool savvy. An **enthusiastic grandparent** can be a great asset here.

A child is in more danger of harming themselves if they lack experience and have not had guidance in safe tool use. So why not start early? It's a great way to **build the confidence** of both you and your child. It also teaches them not to be afraid of sharp tools whilst also managing risk for themselves, an essential skill we all need for life.

I have witnessed firsthand how easy it is to get a horizontal teenage boy off the screen and outside when the offer of an axe and some logs in need of chopping was presented. We've all heard of the phrase "the right tool for the job" and having two sizes of axes (a splitting axe and a small hatchet) helps in getting through logs effectively, whilst giving you more control when splitting kindling. This can be a **great accompanying activity to fire-lighting** as the kids have cut their own firewood.



Whittling wood can be a hypnotic pastime too. We recommend using a freshly cut or "green" stick. You'll find these easier to work. Something simple like peeling the bark off is a great way to start. Your child's imagination will soon take over. We've seen many walking sticks created with striped patterns, spots and shapes carved into bark.

### Some Safety Tips

When using any sharp tool, teach your child to be aware of the space around

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them. There is a danger zone, which others could step into, we call it the '**blood bubble.**' A circular space surrounding the child, the edge of which depends on the extend of their reach with the tool. Get your child to stretch their arm holding the tool in a circle, this is the space nobody can enter whilst they are using the blade. If someone enters their 'blood bubble' then they are to stop what they are doing until the person leaves their space. This is a good practice to teach and puts the responsibility onto the child – which is empowering in itself.

← Depending on the age of your child you may want to begin their whittling journey with a **potato peeler** or eating knife. When you and your child are ready you can then step up to something sharper.

As a general safety rule we'd encourage inexperienced whittlers to always use **the knife away from their body.** If you want to be extra cautious you can ask the child to put a leather glove on their off-hand. Also, avoid working with the knife whilst the stick is sat between the legs, this is dangerous. Rather ensure the knife and stick are all places on one side of the body. This way, any cuts that slip will only slice thin air. Take a look at the picture below. This boy is using his knife in a safe position.

Remember a **sharp knife is safer than a blunt knife** as it cuts cleaner and requires less force to make the cut, so you have more control. You can buy knives with a guard which stops the fingers possibly slipping onto the blade but this is not essential. Use your judgement.

It's important to remember that kids will accidentally cut themselves at some point whilst using tools (I still do it as an adult) and **that's okay.** These grazes and scrapes are all part of life and the learning experience.

We'll be posting videos covering tool use with children on our [YouTube channel](#), so look out for updates on our website.



## **Taking It Further**

There is a right of passage that some cultures use to encourage responsibility and reward effort. Once the child is competent with using a knife they are then given a knife of their own as a gift. They must look after it, use it wisely and respect it. What a proud moment it would be for any parent or guardian to know that their child was ready to receive their own knife and would be trusted with it. How empowering this must be for the child also.

## 9. Build Dens

We don't need to try and sell this as a winning idea! ALL kids love to have their own secret place or hideaway that they can call their own. From a simple tipi built from a few sticks and covered in leaves, to an elaborate tree house fit for a family of Ewoks. The variety of dens that kids have built has seen everything in between.



The den needs to be created by them rather than handed to them on a plate or with too much intervention from yourself, so try and take a passive role in any help you give them, they're in charge. Help when asked but this activity is most successful when it is as child-led as possible. In the future you could always get involved with something more elaborate if you're creating something permanent – but let's start simple.

The desire to build shelter is a natural human instinct. This activity is also a great team exercise, where kids can learn practical skills, problem solve and also get creative in the process.

Rather than using lots of living material (which will have a greater impact on the land) we recommend sticking to dead wood and leaf litter to begin with. Thinking about safety for a second, it's worth checking that kids aren't using rotten wood as a main support in case of collapse under load.

### Some Things You Might Find Useful:

string • scissors • loppers/secateurs • bowsaw

### Our Tipi Tips

There's no right or wrong way to build a den – it's all about the child's play experience and creativity. But if you're looking for inspiration, here's one we made earlier...

The den seen in these photos below was made using a basic design, which strung up a main ridgepole between two standing trees. These trees were far enough apart to allow me to lie down comfortably.

**Step 1:** Ridgepole is lashed securely between two standing trees at a height, which can be comfortably worked by the builder.

**Step 2:** At each end, two main A Frame poles are rested against the ridgepole and locked together. A secure lashing ensures they won't fall. The ends of these poles can be slightly pushed into the soil for added strength.

**Step 3:** Between the two A Frames, I laid sticks of even lengths at close intervals, vertically. Lock these in position where possible, by weaving. I left a gap on one side for the entrance.

**Step 4:** Thin, but long sticks (preferably recently fallen so still green) are used as weavers, horizontally, between the uprights.

**Step 5:** Brushwood, greenery and leaf litter is woven between the weavers and uprights in layers. The more time you have, the more layers you can add for insulation and protection.



## A Fun Way to Test the Shelter

So, your kids think their new den is pretty waterproof, eh? Well try this for an extra giggle. Grab a watering can and get your little builders to sit under their finished shelter whilst you sprinkle water from the can over the brush. Listen out for the squeals of excitement. You can then follow this by looking at the areas of the den which need improving.

### No Woodland, No Problem!

So you don't have easy access to a woodland or wild space. So why not use old bits of furniture, bed sheets or blankets. This can be just as much fun in any urban garden. Let the kid's imagination explore what's possible, using items from the home.

### Taking It Further

If your kids are really into their dens then why not give them the challenge of staying overnight? We recommend picking a dry and warm night for their first adventure so they get a positive experience first time round. This can be combined with fire lighting and campfire cooking for a really wild weekend.

## 10. Go With the Craze

If you're trying to get your kids outdoors and into the wonders of nature, do you find yourself having to compete against the latest kids craze, in order to get your child's attention? Well as they say, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." This is how we did it...

### Our REAL Minecraft Adventure!

At the time of writing, Minecraft was the craze children were going nuts for. In the game, players have to survive in a hostile environment; build their own house, hunt their food, mine for materials and fend off wandering monsters. So we thought; "this is perfect. Why can't this be done outdoors instead of onscreen?" We ran full days of Minecraft themed activities for kids who were set a number of challenges inspired by the game through the day and all the while they were building their homes (dens) before "night" fell and the monsters woke up.

So, which celebrity or what character is inspiring kids right now? Can you use this character's adventures or story setting to make your own outdoors adventure? You can link this with Tip #1 'Bring the Outdoors In' by follow-



ing a session of watching kids nature-based programmes with some outdoor activities using what they've just seen. Kids love pretend.

### Taking It Further

Get together with other parents and their kids, and plan full day or even a weekend's camping where you take your adventure to the next level. Birthday parties are a great excuse to do this – but you don't really need one.

# GOING BEYOND THE BOOK

So, you've got **10 great tips** to inspire your children to get outdoors and into the beauty and wonder of the natural world. You've also got much more than 10 ideas of how to implement those tips. So, what are you waiting for? We hope you'll find them effective. Please let us know how you get on.

You can email us with any questions or comments at: [thewoodlandclassroom@gmail.com](mailto:thewoodlandclassroom@gmail.com)

There's another way you can get your kids inspired to get outdoors. That would be by staying in touch with us at the **Woodland Classroom**.

We offer the following award-winning services:

## **Forest School Sessions**

school visits, woodland sites and public events

## **Bushcraft Skills Days**

Axe work, whittling, wild cooking, nature awareness and more

## **Kids Clubs**

after-school clubs / parent & toddler groups / youth clubs

## **Woodland Skills Tutoring**

conservation and countryside crafts for adult learners

## **Living Histories**

combining outdoor learning with the excitement of our ancient past

**Call James or Lea on 07876 794098**

Check out [our website](#) here to find out more. You'll also find **our blog** here where we share our experiences and ideas with our readers.

If you haven't signed up to our **mailing list** yet then get to our site and get ready to receive news about our exciting upcoming events as they're announced.

You can also "like" us on [our Facebook](#) page where we post regular updates.

Then there's [our YouTube channel](#) which is building a library of outdoor skills videos, inspiration and advice for parents, teachers and activity leaders.

*"Thanks for reading"* James and Lea 😊

**“We have such a brief opportunity to pass on to our children our love for this Earth, and to tell our stories. These are the moments when the world is made whole. In my children's memories, the adventures we've had together in nature will always exist.”**

Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.

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