

Support Resilience by Connecting Children with Nature

by Karen Stephens

We see children daily trying to beat the odds, trying to stay sane amidst insane circumstances. The stresses vary, but they typically fall under the umbrella of family dysfunction, including domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and child abuse.

I don't go a week without hearing someone say, "It's a wonder that child makes it." And yet, most do. Despite role modeling to the contrary, they become competent, responsible adults, capable of loving and caring for a family of their own. They don't repeat the cycle of dysfunction.

There are many people who prove that one can be a successful adult even having lived a challenged childhood. How do they do it? What makes them resilient enough to maintain positive attitudes and behaviors in spite of having seen the worst in life during their most vulnerable time of life?

Researchers have identified multiple factors that contribute to children's resilience. I will focus on one that is often overlooked (or perhaps just taken for granted): nature. I'll illustrate with two people you may be familiar with.

For instance, does Margaret Wise Brown ring a bell? It should. Her 100+ picture books include classics, such as *Goodnight Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny*, both still popular in bookstores today. For over 50 years, her warm, sensitive, and touching stories have set the stage for cozy, affectionate readings in millions of families.

In 1980, Karen Stephens became director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department.

She writes a weekly newspaper column, "Keeping the Young at Heart," and is the author of a high school textbook, *The Child Care Professional*.



But sadly, Leonard Marcus, her biographer, states Ms. Brown's own childhood didn't feature such stable, responsive family interactions. In contrast, it was isolated and chaotic. She experienced a "void left unattended by her parents." Her father traveled frequently for extended periods, and when he was home, his manner was described as "absent." Her mother was preoccupied and disabled with illness. When in school, Margaret moved four times by seventh grade. Not the nurturing one would hope for. And yet, Margaret matured to become one of our most beloved, prolific children's writers. What provided her emotional support when her family structure was so weak? Marcus says: "An emotionally resilient, sanguine young child, Margaret discovered a refuge of sorts in nature. Deep-seated affections were transferred onto the landscape, to the small animals she observed and kept as pets, to wildflowers, trees, sky, and water."

Here's another example of a resilient child who ended up contributing much to many. Due to an undetected vision problem, he lived the first six years of his life seeing no more than three inches in front of him. Partly as a result, he felt socially isolated. He recalls: "I was more or less a loner growing up in Oregon. Walking in the woods or by the river strengthened and comforted me. I found solace in the company of nature — so full of wonder, constant variety, and amazing life: the soft sounds of the wind in the trees, the river rushing past rocks and fallen trees, the current burbling and swishing — all this brought peace and refreshment to my soul. For hours, I watched the river rush by, with small eddies and mysterious upwelling clear patches, pushed up from the depths by great unseen rocks and forms. A constant twittering and chirping of the birds filled the trees and brush; overlaying it all, the constant changing sweet fragrance of moss, trees, earth, and the play of gentle rain."

That boy, who lived in a fog-like early childhood, became the renowned nature photographer, Christopher Burkett. Nature sustained his spirit in lonely times. His gift in

return has been a lifetime of honoring and sharing her beauty through photography.

Why Nature Comforts Stressed Children

Earmarks of a dysfunctional family can help us understand why nature has a special way of soothing children under duress. Hostile home environments are often unpredictable and explosive. Children describe *walking on eggs*, fearing what might happen if they make a wrong move or make even the most minor mistake.

There's an absence of routine, ritual, or pattern. Nothing is reliable, no one can be counted on. Depending on a parent's emotional resources, children may not get meals, clean clothes, or even be guaranteed lights, water, or warmth. (Utilities are often shut off when bills aren't paid for various reasons, including job failure, spending money on drugs and alcohol, or gambling.) Children in chaotic families aren't even guaranteed a good night's sleep, especially when parents' fights bring police pounding on the door.

When adults' needs reign supreme, there's little chance for children to get the attention, affection, or comfort they need for their own emotional and social well-being. Children are often threatened into silence, or are frightened of divulging *family secrets* that bring on shame, so they become isolated from extended family, classmates, and neighbors. They don't invite others home fearing a *scene* might erupt.

When a child lives in such conditions, escaping to nature is often described as *haven*. Nestling in the privacy of a grove of trees provides a sense of security and protection. Peace and quiet amidst shrubs rank high when back in the house dishes are flying and cussing taints any air worth breathing.

Predictable rhythms, patterns, and cycles of nature relax and soothe children wrought with anxiety. Leisurely watching a spider spin a web, willow branches sway with the wind, a bird feed her nestlings, or even icicles melt in a warming sun helps focus a child's attention on amazing and beautiful details — details that not only distract but temper the heated emotions that boil over during family strife.

A whimsical imagination that allows children to emotionally connect with plants and animals can be a productive coping tool as children try to survive deplorable living conditions. Resilient adults often tell me that by regularly

retreating to nature they came to consider trees, flowers, and wildlife their most steadfast friends. Some confided their troubles to wildlife they encountered, like foraging rabbits and squirrels. They imagined them to be compassionate listeners and accepting allies. One woman told me that as a stressed second grader she made up songs about her woes and sang to trees.

Spending hours outdoors with nature allows children to leisurely and intimately experience nature's gifts. Whether they build forts for fantasy (or literal escape) or simply wade streams hunting for clamshells and tadpoles, the world of nature shelters children, blanketing them with a protective shield, helping them fend off the stress of irrational, illogical, and unfathomable adult behavior.

Connecting Children to Nature

Since nature can be so helpful to children, what can we do to ensure them access as often as possible? Just as challenging, what nature experiences can we provide within the confines of group care — a system of care that is so riddled with liability concerns that caregivers are tempted to wrap children in cotton and leave them on a shelf until their parents arrive!

Nabhan and Trimble, in *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*, make a strong case that direct contact with nature is a basic human need, not a luxury children can afford to go without. Here's the type of nature experiences they suggest we offer: "[Children] need time to wander, to be outside, to nibble on icicles and watch ants, to build with dirt and sticks in a hollow of earth, to lie back and contemplate the clouds and chickadees. These simple acts forge the connections that define a land of one's own — home and refuge for both girls and boys. . . . They form the secure foundation to which we return again and again in our struggle to be strong and connected, to be complete."

They remind us that children need a bounty of experiences with the natural world, especially through spontaneous, hands-on backyard/neighborhood adventures. Although contact with nature through schools, nature centers, and museums are helpful, they cite three key strategies for introducing children to nature: opportunities for intimate involvement with plants and animals, firsthand exposure to a variety of wild animals carrying out their routine behaviors in natural habitats, and adults sharing knowledge of habitat and natural history with children.

While a wonderful experience, a once-a-year visit to the zoo or nature preserve isn't enough *wilderness* exposure to allow children to develop an authentic, strong connection to nature. In fact, when I've talked to resilient nature lovers, exotic wildlife adventures did not stand out in their childhood memories. Over and over, they mention daily, or at the very least weekly, experiences with familiar natural resources in their immediate neighborhood, whether they lived in the city, the suburb, or the rural countryside. Accessible nature was far more important than flashy, exotic nature featured in cages or glass display cases. Spontaneous and regular contact with nature lead to attachments that resonate to an emotional core, usually for a lifetime.

So, the good news is that no matter how meager our natural surroundings, they are the best place to start connecting kids to nature. And lest you think otherwise, the writings of naturalist Rachel Carson caution: "Even if you are a city dweller, you can find some place, perhaps a park or golf course, where you can observe the mysterious migrations of the birds and the changing seasons. And with your child you can ponder the mystery of a growing seed, even if it be only one planted in a pot of earth in the kitchen window."

How should you begin your nature discoveries? Children are naturally close to the ground, so looking down is a good place to start! Dig in dirt, play in mud puddles, trace earthworm tracks with fingers, peer at the plants in sidewalk cracks, lay on your tummies observing mole mounds, roll on your back to watch a bird fly back and forth during nest building.

Get to know neighborhood trees, shrubs, flowers, wild life, and waterways. Become thoroughly acquainted with all the creatures that share your immediate habitat. Go outside to play, daily and in all seasons. Note seasonal weather and encourage children to observe how trees, shrubs, birds, insects, and wildlife respond and survive.

Model curiosity about, and gentleness for, the earth and even its smallest, most unattractive creatures. Respect their homes as you would a human's; children will learn to do the same.

Enhance your play yard to showcase the beauty of nature. Plant a variety of trees and shrubs that will change seasonally as well as provide shelter and food for nature's wildlife.

Make space for gardens! Vegetable gardens nurture the body. Herb gardens tickle the nose and taste buds.

Butterfly and hummingbird gardens touch the imagination and soul. Gardens of ornamental grasses dance and sing with the wind, encouraging children to stop, listen, and savor.

Make moving air tangible to the eye and ear; hang banners and flags, make wind chimes from natural items, place whirligigs and wind petals in flower pots.

Create cozy nooks and crannies where children can visit the daily business of nature, whether it be a spider spinning a web, a squirrel gathering nuts, a robin pecking for worms, or a milkweed pod swelling to release feathery seeds.

Include spaces that allow children to climb on and dig around natural objects such as small crabapple trees, fallen logs, steppingstones, and boulders. Create small berms and rolling hills children can roll and sled down. Provide large spaces for digging in dirt and sand. Include a water source, with hose and buckets, to increase discovery opportunities.

Bring nature indoors as much as you humanely, responsibly, and authentically can. Incorporate it throughout your classroom. Have children pick flowers for their parents' sign-in table. Ask them to collect items from nature to create centerpieces for mealtime. Set up an aquarium and make a terrarium. Hang prisms in windows to play with sunlight. Hang wind chimes for soothing nap-time sounds, or nature mobiles for nap-time gazing. If you have the space and time to keep a class pet safe, clean, and healthy, by all means include one!

Encourage parents to include nature in their children's lives by educating them on local nature preserves and habitat restoration sites. Inform them of zoos, science museums, planetariums, greenhouses, state and local parks, botanical gardens, and natural history museums they can visit on weekends and vacations. In your newsletter, share simple activities parents can enjoy with children. Include parents in classroom nature activities. Invite them along as volunteers when taking field trips to an aquarium or children's zoo.

Resources and Tools for Connecting with Nature

Children come equipped with the best tools for experiencing nature: their insatiable senses! Sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste all come into play when children actively explore nature.

While not necessary, there are other tools that enrich children's sensory experiences. They don't have to be elaborate, just make sure they're safe and in good repair. Exploration tools include (but are not limited to): magnifying glass; paper bags or small buckets for specimen collection; binoculars; bug cases; Polaroid camera; sketch pad and pencil; simple identification books for trees, birds, flowers, etc.; paper and crayons for rubbings; metal spoons or small hand shovels for digging; sticks for prodding. School-agers will find videotaping animal behavior or clouds interesting.

But, by far, children's most important resource for resilience is a teacher, mentor, or guide who will spend meaningful time with them — someone who will enthusiastically and safely introduce them to a natural world brimming with beauty and endless fascinations, an engaging world worth enjoying, worth savoring, and worth protecting.

Rachel Carson said it most eloquently: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in." You can be that adult, that cherished someone a child chooses to walk beside on her natural path to resilience. Thank your lucky stars for the privilege.

Resources for Nature Activities

Baille, P., & Bartee, H. (Eds.) *Earthworms*. Newsletter of Early Childhood Outdoors Institute, 1313 North Bellevue Boulevard, Bellevue, NE 68005-4012, (402) 731-3140. E-mail: earthworm@ecoinstitute.org.

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A Sense of Place: Books That Connect Children to Nature

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Dvorak, D. Jr. (1994). *A sea of grass: The tall grass prairie*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.

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George, W. T. (1989). *Box turtle at Long Pond*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

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Goudey, A. (1959). *Houses from the sea*. New York: Scribners Publishing.

Howell, W. C. (1999). *I call it sky*. New York: Walker & Co.

Keats, E. J. (1962). *The snowy day*. New York: The Viking Press.

Lesser, C. (1997). *Storm on the desert*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.

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San Souci, D. (1990). *North country night*. New York: Doubleday.

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