

# Connecting Families with Nature

Activities to connect young children and their families with nature



# INTRODUCTION

Research shows that spending time in nature is good for us. It is good for our wellbeing and for our physical and mental health. The closer we feel to nature, the happier we are, and the more likely we are to look after wildlife and the environment. Taking part in activities that increase our connection to nature can help to enhance these benefits.

Being connected to nature is something that can start right from birth and this handbook includes a range of activities designed for families and carers who have babies and young children. The activities described in this handbook have been specially designed to be enjoyed by everyone, and they can help you and your family increase connection with nature. They might encourage you and your child/children to notice the nature around you in more detail, and you may become more aware of nature both close to home and farther afield.

We hope that you will enjoy trying out some of these activities with your family, friends or in baby and toddler groups, and that this is just the beginning of your lifelong relationship with nature.



# PLAYING SAFELY

We recommend that parents/carers enjoy these activities with their babies and children, and, with young children, we advise close observation to maintain safety in the environments that often contain small objects, uneven surfaces or plants that might sting or scratch etc.

# PLAYING WITH RESPECT FOR NATURE

All our activities are designed to allow nature to be respected. We encourage families to enjoy their time in nature and ask that they take any litter (snack wrappers, wipes etc.) away when they leave. This allows natural spaces to be maintained for wildlife to live well and for other people to enjoy.



# ACTIVITIES

## Sky Bathing Babies

Lie back, look up and enjoy the sights and sounds around you

## Mother Nature's Match Box

Explore the land and collect some of nature's treasures

## Nature's Paint Brush

A work of art from the very start

## Goodnight Moon, Hello Stars!

Tune into the natural world at night

## Colour Gathering

Look and match the colours of nature

## Treasure Hunt

A nature walk with a difference

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Making art where you are

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## Up Above

Looking for nature overhead

## Rub a Dub Tree

Making art with the trees

## Finding a Fairy Garden

Magical thinking with fairies

## My old friend the tree

Appreciating our trees



# SKY BATHING BABIES

Lie back, look up and enjoy the sights and sounds around you.

Time: 10–20 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- A camping mat or blanket.

## You will learn

- **Connect:** Tune into nature; take a moment to enjoy all that you can see, hear and feel.
- **Share in the experience:** Talk to your baby about the things that surround you and share in the experience of being outdoors. Point to things you enjoy; such as the clouds, trees or birds that swoop across the skies. Imitate the sounds in nature you can hear or create a story from all that you see.

## Before you begin

- Find a location that is safe and pleasant to lie down on. This might be on a grass bank, somewhere close to trees, or near to a stream.
- Place your blanket on the floor and take a few moments to get comfortable.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not make the activity more fun and ask a friend or family member to join you?
- Why not suggest this as an activity to do as part of a parent and baby group that you attend.
- If you have older children, then why not include them in the activity too? For example, you could ask them to create make-believe creatures out of the clouds.

# SKY BATHING BABIES

Place your baby on their back close to you. Let them know that you're about to do something fun. Lie down, side-by-side and take a few minutes to be silent. Notice your breath and gently breathe in and out for a few moments.



Turn your gaze upwards to the sky. See if you can pick out anything that interests you and point things out to your baby. Stay in conversation with your baby for a little while.

Expand outwards to the tops of trees or other features in the landscape. Take a moment to listen to the sounds of nature, smell the air, grass or trees, feel the breeze or just observe the things around you.



Talk about the things you enjoy the most and share these with your baby. Perhaps there are animal noises you can imitate or point and follow the path of animals you can see.

Perhaps you want to create a short story about the things that surround you. When you have finished, take a few moments to sit up and adjust to the surroundings before you leave.



# MOTHER NATURE'S MATCH BOX

Explore the land and collect some of nature's treasures

Time: 10–20 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- An empty matchbox (any size) or other similar container.

## You will learn

- **Connect:** Tune into nature; take a moment to enjoy all that you can see, hear and feel.
- **Gather:** Collect fallen leaves, acorns, pinecones or other nature-related objects.
- **Share in the experience:** Take your baby with you to find interesting and familiar natural objects. Talk to them about what you are trying to find. Allow them to look, smell, touch or hear the sounds the objects make.

## Before you begin

- Ensure you have your matchbox or container with you.
- You may want to have wipes or hand sanitiser.
- Find a location that is safe and likely to contain natural objects. This might be in a park, wood or forest, or some other type of natural space such as a garden.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not make the activity more fun and collect seeds from fallen trees (such as acorns)? You could fill your matchbox with a small amount of soil and attempt to grow them into seedlings.
- If you have older children, you could make a nature-based baby rattle. To do this you could attach your objects to an old stick with string.
- Decorate a rock at home with paints or crayons.

# MOTHER NATURE'S MATCH BOX

Carry or have your baby alongside you. This could be in their pushchair/stroller. You might allow them to hold the box/container.



Take a moment to look at your surroundings and notice where you might find interesting natural objects.

As you collect things, and if it is safe to do so, allow your child to explore them with you. The object may have intriguing features to point out, it may smell fragrant, it could feel interesting to touch, or it may make a sound of some sort. Please don't leave your child unattended with objects or something that may present as a choking hazard.



As you collect objects one by one, place them inside your matchbox/container as a keepsake or to explore further at home.

When you have collected enough things, close your box and finish the activity.



# NATURE'S PAINT BRUSH

A work of art from the very start

Time: 10–20 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- Fallen leaves of any kind, a short branch or twig and a small piece of string.
- A bottle or cup with water, and a piece of paper.
- A camping mat or blanket.

## You will learn

- Connect: Tune into nature; take a moment to find leaves that are beautiful to you.
- Share in the experience: Search for and choose the types of leaves you would like to use. Spend a few minutes enjoying their rich colours, inspiring shapes and silky textures. Ask your child which ones they prefer and get them to choose.

## Before you begin

- Find a location that is safe where there are likely to be leaves on the ground.
- Place your blanket on the floor and take a few moments to get comfortable.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not dip the leaves and make leaf prints instead? These will show the shape and veins of the leaf.
- Why not use other ingredients to make different colours; the green from grass, or the yellow of dandelions?
- If you have older children, you could ask them to use your leaf prints later at home and turn them into leaf cartoon characters.

# NATURE'S PAINT BRUSH

Bring your baby with you and search for one or more leaves (to make a paint brush).



If you can find a small fallen branch, then this will form the wooden part of your paint brush. Attach the leaves by using some string to tie them to the branch. If you can't find a wooden branch, then the leaves by themselves will be just fine.

Take your water and pour it onto some dirt and make some mud.



Dip your leaves into the mud and get your piece of paper ready.

Let your baby use the paintbrush and make their own nature's art.



# GOODNIGHT MOON, HELLO STARS!

Tune into the natural world at night

Time: 10–20 minutes

Location: Indoors or Outdoors

## You will need

- A camping mat or blanket.
- Warm clothes and extra blankets if it is cold outside.
- Access to somewhere safe outdoors or perhaps a comfortable place by an indoor window.

## You will learn

- Connect: Tune into nature; take a moment to enjoy all that you can see, hear and feel at night.
- Share in the experience: Talk to your baby about the things that you can see; the bright full moon, twinkling stars or things that look different at night.

## Before you begin

- If you are going outside, then find a location that is safe and pleasant to sit or lie down on.
- Place your blanket on the floor and take a few moments to get comfortable. Ensure you are warm enough and have a good view of the night sky.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not include older children in this experience? They can tell a story or sing a song to your baby.
- Why not look for story books in your local library or songs online about the moon and the stars?
- Why not take a moment for yourself to look at the night sky? If you are up with your baby at night, you can do this from inside or outside if the weather is clear. What do you notice?

# GOODNIGHT MOON, HELLO STARS!

Have your baby close to you and let them know that you're about to do something fun. Sit, stand or lie down, and take a few moments to be silent and adjust to the night. If you are indoors then you may want to switch off the lights.



Turn your gaze upwards to the night sky. See if you can pick out anything that interests you and point things out to your baby. Stay in conversation with your baby for a few minutes.

Expand your vision outwards to any other features in the landscape. If you are outdoors then taking note of the different types of sounds, the smell of the air, the breeze or just observe the things around you.



Say hello to the moon and the stars. Tell your baby about the moon, perhaps you know a story that you can share with them. Talk to your baby about the stars. Perhaps you know a nurse rhyme or song about them.



Enjoy the stillness of the night for a while and the peace it may bring.



# COLOUR GATHERING

Look and match the colours of nature

Time: 15–30 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- Items from home or paint colour sample cards from a DIY/home improvement shop with lots of shades of a colour in nature (e.g., in spring green is great, in autumn reds, yellows and browns are ideal). Home-found items should be easy to carry (e.g. small toy, ribbon, sock, piece of paper, pen, cut outs from magazines).

## You will learn

- Connect with the senses: Tune into nature; focus in on the details of what you can see.
- Share in the experience: Help your child to find small, coloured things to take on your 'matching adventure'. Join in with friends and create a 'lucky dip' bag of the coloured objects everyone has brought.

## Before you begin

- Find a location that is safe to explore. This could be a park with trees and bushes, a woodland, or local green space.
- Check for plants such as nettles which should be avoided.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not make the activity more fun and ask a friend, family member or pre-school group to join you? Try to avoid turning it into a race – tuning into nature doesn't need to be rushed!
- Why not take a photo of the matches or 'snaps' so you can tell others about your adventure when you get home?

# COLOUR GATHERING

Have your child select a coloured item from home/paint colour sample.



Ask them to find things in nature which match the sample/swatch shade. Walk with them as they explore and try to match the colour with leaves, grass, moss etc.

You could explore the sense of touch too, contrasting how the moss feels compared to a shiny spring leaf or crinkly autumn leaf for example.



You could talk to your child about the season, e.g. how in spring the new leaves come out, and how the green colour helps them to grow. You can link this to how we need fresh air and light from being outside to help us feel healthier too.

You could also talk about the autumn process of the leaves dying and the trees moving into their winter cycle of resting in the winter. Just like animals who hibernate, the trees sleep too!



# TREASURE HUNT

A nature walk with a difference

Time: 15–60 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- A treasure list. Make a list or draw pictures of items you might see on your walk. These might vary according to the time of year and the age of the children – for example, you might include a rock, a stick, a blackbird, a dog, a cow, a flower, a leaf, moss, a duck, or a squirrel. Remember, short lists suit young children.
- A pen so you (or your child) can tick or cross the items/images they find off the list.

## You will learn

- Connect with the senses: Tune into nature as you walk, see what you can notice as you walk along.
- Share in the experience: You can ask your child to help you make the list or draw the pictures.

## Before you begin

- Plan your route. You can use a local route, an urban walk, or explore farther away and incorporate this in a nature-based day out at a park.

## Activity add-ons

- As you find items, try to make up a story or a song about each one
- Look closely at the smaller items as you find them. Point out details such as how the moss feels, how the birds sing.
- Find which tree the leaf belongs to by matching the shape and colour.

# TREASURE HUNT

Pack your treasure hunt supplies (list, pen, snacks, water, raincoat etc) into a bag and choose your route.



Tick off your items as you see them. Try to think ahead so your child has more success – e.g. if you see something first, don't tell your child, but encourage your child to look in that direction so they spot it first!

You might gather some items and take them home to make an art project – e.g. a pinecone decoration, painted rocks.



You could make up a story about the objects as you find them, try to include all your objects into the story.

# NATURE ART

Making art where you are

Time: 15–60 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- A place to walk in nature.
- Clothing for the weather conditions.

## You will learn

- To see nature as something beautiful: Noticing the shapes and forms of natural items, and creating something new from them.
- Share in the experience: Let your child be the 'boss' and design the art creation, you can be their 'helper', gathering items with them. Or you could make your own version, so your child sees this is fun for all ages of people.

## Before you begin

- Think of a place in nature where you can leave your natural art. This could be in a private/shared garden, in a local woodland or even at a community field or green space.
- Make sure you have footwear that is comfortable for exploring.
- You might inspire your child by showing them photos on the internet of nature-based art such as the leaf patterns and rock towers by Antony Gormley.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not go take a photo of your art in nature? Show it to others when you get home.
- Go back and visit your art and see what happens to it over time.
- Look for images of nature and art in books.

# NATURE ART

When you are in your natural space, think about what catches your eye—fallen leaves? Rocks? Sticks? Notice the colours and shapes.



Gather up fallen objects and let your child think about what kind of art or sculpture they would like to make e.g. a tower of rocks? A pattern made of leaves and sticks?

Encourage your child to have it look any way they choose: art is personal (and it may look different to something you find pleasing!).



When they feel their work of art is complete, stand back and ask them to tell you more about it, e.g., how they chose the materials, what they might name it, and how they feel about it. Celebrate their art.



# HOMES IN NATURE

Making a home for nature's creatures

Time: 15–45 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- Access to somewhere outdoors, somewhere with different plants, or large rocks, fallen leaves and/or sticks could be ideal.

## You will learn

- To develop compassion for nature: Tune into nature; focus on how you might be able to protect or help nature.
- Share in the experience: Before you go, talk to your child about how you are going to make a little home for an animal or insect. Talk about what kind of animal or insect they might want to make a home for. When you get out into nature, ask them about where they think the animal/insect might feel safe or cosy.

## Before you begin

- Find a location that is safe to explore. This could be a park with trees and bushes, a woodland, or local green space. Think about places where you could make a home for a small animal or insect.
- Check for plants to avoid such as thistles or nettles.

## Activity add-ons

- Make the activity more fun by taking a small animal toy with you on your adventure. Let this toy test out the new home you have created.
- You could collect some resources and try making an insect house to keep outside your home. Use a small cardboard box with holes in it and fill it with leaves and sticks.

# HOMES IN NATURE

Ask your child to think of a small animal or insect they would like to make a home for e.g., a squirrel, rabbit, frog or ladybird.



Walk with them as they explore and look for an area to make the home.

Help your child to find things they could use to make the home cosy; such as fallen leaves, moss, or sticks. Explore how these feel – are they soft to make the home cosy, or hard to provide protection?



Talk to your child about how animals live in homes, but different homes to people. Talk about how we can help them by leaving some natural things around in the outdoor space such as fallen leaves and sticks for them to make a home in.

# UP ABOVE

Looking for nature overhead

Time: 15–60 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- Access to somewhere outdoors, preferably an area with some trees. This activity works well in areas with more than one type of tree – the more variety, the better.
- A small mirror if you have one – a make-up compact mirror can work well, – but if you don't have one, you can still do this activity without one.

## You will learn

- Connect with the senses: Tune into nature as you walk, see what you can see and notice as you walk along. You might spot things you have not seen before.
- Share in the experience: Ask your child to think about what they might see when looking up into the trees.

## Before you begin

- Plan where you will walk – you can use any route so long as there will be some trees along the way. You could walk at a local park, in an urban area with street trees, in woodland, or a local country park.
- Make sure your footwear is comfortable for walking, and take raincoats, snacks and some water with you. If you have a small mirror at home, then take this with you as it can help children to see things from a different perspective.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not go with friends or family so you can all enjoy looking up into the trees.
- Notice high up cloud shapes, birds or plants.

# UP ABOVE

Choose where you are going to walk and pack your supplies (water, snacks, coats etc.) into a bag. Take your mirror if you have one.



As you walk, take time to stop when you come to a tree and look up into the branches. What do you see that you might not have noticed before. Are there any birds? What colour are the leaves? Do the leaves and branches move in the wind?

If you have a mirror with you, hold this under the tree and look at the reflection in the mirror. See what you can notice by looking carefully into the mirror.



Let your child hold the mirror and point to what they can see in the tree.

Move onto the next tree on your walk and see what else you can spot that is similar or different. Are the leaves the same colour or shape? Can you see more moss or buds in one or the other?



# RUB A DUB TREE

Making art with the trees

Time: 15–60 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- A place to walk in nature where there are some trees.
- Some paper.
- Some wax crayons.
- Clothing for the weather conditions.

## You will learn

- To see how beautiful nature can be: Noticing the differences in the bark and leaves from different trees.
- Share in the experience: Let your child decide which colour crayons they would like to take with you. Any colours are fine, they don't need to match the colour of the trees.

## Before you begin

- Think of a place that has a few different trees where you can create your bark rubbings. This could be in a garden, local park or woodland, or you could use urban street trees if the location is safe from traffic.
- Pack a bag with your paper and crayons.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not use different coloured crayons?
- You can also try this activity with leaves and do a leaf rubbing, although you might find it easier to take a leaf back home so you can put it on a flat surface to do the rubbing.
- Use one piece of paper for several bark rubbings and notice the similarities and differences between the different trees.

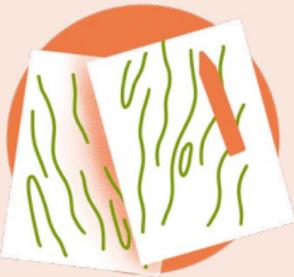
# RUB A DUB TREE

Look out for a tree where your child would like to do a bark rubbing. Encourage them to feel the bark by touching it yourself. Notice if it is rough or smooth.



Hold the paper over the bark and show your child how to rub the crayon over the paper, pressing onto the bark. The pattern of the bark will come through on the paper.

Move the paper to a different part of the bark and rub the crayon over it again. Notice what the pattern looks like.



Walk to a different tree and do another bark rubbing so you can compare the different patterns they make.

# FINDING A FAIRY GARDEN

Magical thinking with fairies

Time: 15–45 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- An outdoor space to explore. This could be a local park, a garden or woodland nearby. You could even explore a window box.

## You will learn

- To see how beautiful nature can be: Getting up close to nature and looking at it in detail.
- Share in the experience: Help your child to think about what might be in an imaginary fairy garden. Talk about fairies and how they might like to live in little gardens.

## Before you begin

- You might want to look at some pictures of fairies with your child before you go exploring. This will help them to understand what fairies are imagined to look like.
- You might want to remind them that fairies are make believe, or you might want to encourage some magical thinking.
- Think about where you might look for a fairy garden – at the bottom of a tree, underneath a plant, tucked behind a large rock or behind a wall.

## Activity add-ons

- Why not add some things to the fairy garden location – you could add some moss, or a shiny pebble.
- You could draw a picture of a fairy and take this with you or cut it out ready to add to the fairy garden.

# FINDING A FAIRY GARDEN

Look out for a place where a fairy garden could be. Looking for very tiny plants could be an ideal location for a fairy garden. For example, at the base of a tree where some moss is growing – sometimes you might also see tiny mushrooms growing on trees if you look closely.



Encourage your child to use their imagination, think about what it would be like to be a tiny fairy exploring the fairy garden.

Talk to your child about what you can see in the fairy garden. Use your imagination – the fairy might use a leaf from a plant as a shelter, or a piece of moss as a cushion to sit on in their garden.



Look closely at the soil, or ground and see if you can see any tiny fairy footprints. Whilst you look for the footprints encourage your child to see what they notice – are there any insects for example, or small pebbles?

# MY OLD FRIEND THE TREE

Appreciating our trees

Time: 15–20 minutes

Location: Outdoors

## You will need

- An outdoor space with trees to explore. This could be a local park, a garden or woodland nearby.
- Make sure your footwear is comfortable for exploring.

## You will learn

- To see how beautiful nature can be: Getting up close to nature and looking at it in detail.
- Share in the experience: Think about befriending a tree yourself. Talk about what you like about your tree with your child.

## Before you begin

- You might want to talk about how trees can grow older than humans and how they help other wildlife by giving them homes.

## Activity add-ons

- You could go home and make up a bedtime story about your tree and its animal friends.
- You could draw a picture of your tree to go along with your story.
- You could do bark rubbings (see rub a dub tree), or the look up activity when you go back to visit your tree.
- Can you put your arms around the tree? How wide is the trunk at the bottom?
- Can you identify the tree from its leaf? Look it up on an app or in a book/website when you get home. This might be of interest to older children.

# MY OLD FRIEND THE TREE

Find a place with several trees and ask your child/children to pick one they like best.



Encourage your child to tell you why they like that particular one.

Go and explore the tree up close—look up and see how tall it is, look closely at any leaves it has. Feel its bark. Are there any holes in the tree where animals might make a home? Which animals do you think your tree might have as friends? Notice the shapes the branches make, can you see any shapes you know in there?



What human name could you give your trees? Could you go back and visit them at different seasons to see how they change? Pick up a fallen leaf from your tree to take home.

# ABOUT

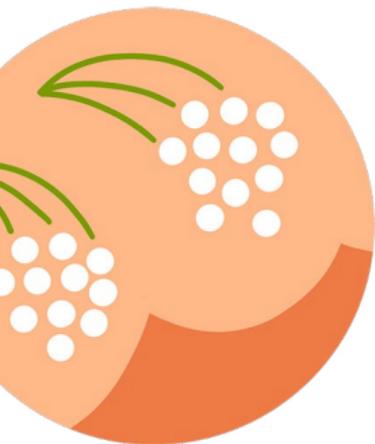
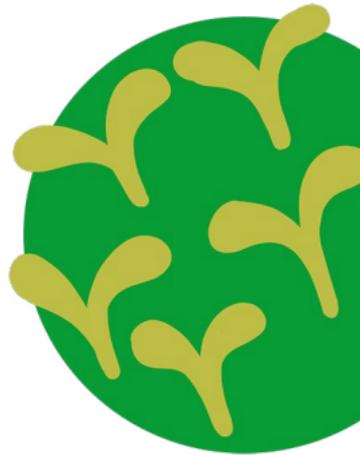
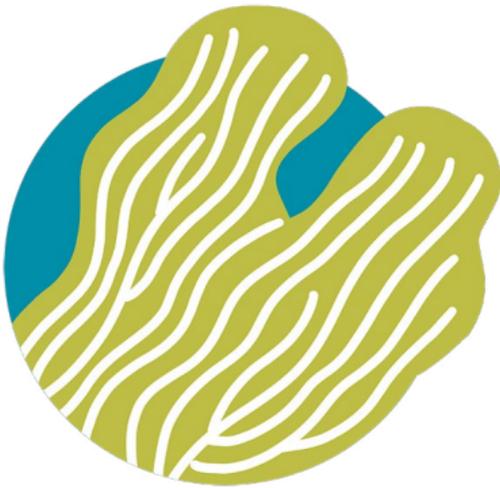
The Nature Connectedness Research Group was established at the University of Derby in 2013. Our research helps us to understand the relationship people have with the natural world and we work to develop interventions and activities that can help people to become more connected with nature. Increasing our connection to nature can bring benefits to both our wellbeing and our conservation behaviour, so connecting with nature is good for us and is also good for wildlife and nature.

We have worked with a range of organisations including the Wildlife Trusts, the Outward Bound Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and Natural England. The researchers who developed this resource have extensive experience researching and evaluating initiatives designed to increase young people's and families' connection to nature.

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