



SERIES 2 · PLAY, WONDER, AND LEARNING

Bringing Wonder Home

Ways to revisit outdoor discoveries through conversation, art, movement, storytelling, and further observation without turning curiosity into a quiz.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 2 - Play, Wonder, and Learning | 10-12 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

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Caregivers decide whether and how to use these ideas based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in their care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when individualized evaluation, advice, or support is needed.

AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 10-12 minutes

Central idea: Outdoor learning continues when families revisit discoveries, ask new questions, and make curiosity part of everyday life at home.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Bring home a few meaningful reminders without collecting everything.
- 2 Help children compare, sort, record, and revisit their observations.
- 3 Let appreciation grow naturally into stewardship.
- 4 Create a family culture in which adults and children keep learning together.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

Let Wonder Continue After the Adventure

Every outdoor adventure eventually ends. The boots come off, hands get washed, backpacks are unpacked, and the day's discoveries may be emptied onto the kitchen table.

But curiosity does not have to stop at the front door.

A smooth stone, pinecone, unusual feather, or interesting leaf can inspire conversation long after the family returns home. When children have opportunities to revisit what they discovered, they begin noticing something important: learning is not confined to one place. Curiosity travels with us.

Conversations that begin outdoors can continue around the dinner table, during bedtime stories, or while quietly examining a favorite discovery together.

The adventure may have ended. The wondering is just beginning.

Big Idea: Learning Deepens When We Return to It

Children are naturally drawn to details adults sometimes overlook: the spiral inside a pinecone, rough bark on one tree and smooth bark on another, or a feather resting beside the trail.

Children do not collect these treasures only because they want to own them. They collect them because something captured their attention and invited them to wonder:

- *“Who dropped this feather?”*
- *“Why is this rock so smooth?”*
- *“How did this leaf get all these holes?”*

Connected Caregivers do not need to provide immediate answers. We nurture curiosity by wondering alongside children. Sometimes we search for answers together. Sometimes we return another day to observe again. Sometimes the wondering itself is enough.

Children gradually discover that learning is not about already knowing. It is about continuing to ask thoughtful questions. That habit of curiosity may become one of childhood's greatest gifts.

Revisit Before Offering Something New

Children do not stop learning when an activity ends. In many ways, that is when some of the richest learning begins. When children retell an experience, examine something more closely, or ask a new question, they deepen their understanding.

Reflection transforms experience into lasting learning.

Adults sometimes feel pressure to keep offering new activities. Children remind us that they often find joy in returning to something familiar and noticing what they missed the first time.

Wonder grows when we give curiosity room to continue.

Create a Wonder Bowl

After an outdoor adventure, invite your child to choose one or two meaningful reminders - where collecting is safe, legal, permitted, and respectful of the place you visited.

Not everything should come home. Thoughtful explorers learn that living flowers, occupied nests, insects, mushrooms, and many other natural treasures are best appreciated where they are. Some parks and protected areas ask visitors to leave even fallen objects in place.

Where collecting is allowed, a child might choose:

- a fallen leaf;
- a smooth stone;
- a pinecone;
- an interesting stick;

- an empty acorn cap;
- seeds or bark already on the ground; or
- a feather, only where collecting it is permitted.

Place these discoveries in a wooden bowl, woven basket, clay dish, or another simple container where the family will see them.

The Wonder Bowl is not valuable because of what it contains. It is valuable because of the conversations it continues to inspire:

- *“Remember where we found this?”*
- *“What do you notice now that we did not notice before?”*
- *“I wonder why this one looks different.”*

Every discovery tells a story: where it was found, what season it was, who was there, and what everyone noticed. Over time, the bowl becomes a reminder that curiosity can keep growing after an adventure ends.

Look for Patterns Together

Children naturally organize the world. They may sort by color, size, shape, texture, or a reason only they understand. Rather than beginning with formal classification, start with simple observations:

- Which rocks look alike?
- Can you find two leaves with the same shape?
- Which pinecone feels heaviest?
- What do you notice about these seeds?

As children compare, sort, and observe, they develop habits that support later mathematical and scientific thinking. More importantly, they practice one of the most valuable lifelong skills: paying attention.

Curiosity grows when we notice patterns. Sometimes our most important role is simply noticing alongside children.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one discovery from a recent outdoor experience and place it somewhere your family will notice it for a few days.

Each time someone pauses near it, invite one small response:

- notice a new detail;
- ask a new question;
- share a memory;
- compare it with something else; or
- tell the story of where it was found.

One discovery can become the beginning of a much larger conversation.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- What continued to capture my child's attention after we came home?
- Did we revisit the experience before moving to something new?
- What story does this object or memory carry?
- What pattern did my child notice or create?
- How can I support collecting without encouraging possession of living or protected things?

The goal is not to create a large collection. It is to preserve room for attention and conversation.

Preserve Wonder Without Making It a Project

Use a Nature Journal as an Invitation

Children do not need to record every outdoor adventure. Trying to document every experience can take away from simply enjoying it.

Instead, invite children to record the discoveries that continue capturing their attention after they return home: a feather they keep examining, a smooth stone that feels comforting, a mushroom they hope to find again, or a question that keeps returning - *"Why do some trees lose their leaves while others stay green?"*

A Nature Journal is not about producing beautiful pages. It is not another assignment. It is a place where curiosity is welcomed.

Some days, a child may fill several pages with drawings, observations, and questions. Other days, one sketch and the date may be enough. A child might dictate while an adult writes, or close the journal and head back outside. All of these responses are valid.

Children do not need another task to complete. They need ways to express curiosity that feel meaningful to them.

A simple journal basket might include:

- blank paper or a journal;
- pencils, colored pencils, or crayons;
- a date stamp;
- a ruler; and
- a magnifying glass for another close look.

Open-ended prompts can invite conversation without requiring the same response every time:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- What are you still wondering about?
- What would you like to learn more about?

There are no right or wrong answers. Curiosity grows when children know their ideas are welcome.

Create a Family Wonder Table

A small seasonal Wonder Table can extend outdoor learning. It does not need to be elaborate. Use a corner of a bookshelf, a small table, or part of a counter. What matters is not the size of the space, but the invitation it offers.

It might include:

- the family's Wonder Bowl;
- Nature Journals;
- a magnifying glass;
- nonfiction books or field guides about local plants, animals, or weather;
- family drawings or photographs;
- a flower in a small vase; and
- permitted treasures that have already completed their purpose outdoors.

Children often return to these spaces on their own. They compare discoveries, ask new questions, tell stories, rearrange collections, or sit quietly observing.

The Wonder Table reminds everyone that learning does not happen only during planned activities. It happens whenever curiosity is welcomed.

Let Stewardship Grow from Appreciation

Children are more likely to protect what they have learned to appreciate. When they discover that insects pollinate flowers, birds depend on trees for shelter, worms support healthy soil, or streams provide homes for living creatures, respect can grow naturally.

Rather than teaching stewardship through fear or guilt, Connected Caregivers teach it through relationship. Families can practice habits such as:

- leaving natural places as beautiful - or more beautiful - than they found them;
- staying on established paths where requested;
- observing living things without disturbing them;
- returning collected items to nature when they have finished inspiring learning, where appropriate;
- picking up litter when it is safe to do so; and
- speaking respectfully about the plants, animals, and places they visit.

Children begin understanding that they are not separate from nature. They are part of it. Caring for the earth becomes another way of caring for one another.

Become a Learning Partner

One of the greatest gifts of slowing down is discovering that children do not expect adults to know everything. They hope we will wonder beside them.

Sometimes the most honest answer is, *"I don't know. How could we find out together?"*

Those words transform adults from experts into learning partners. Children discover that curiosity does not end when we become adults. It continues throughout our lives.

Connected Caregivers do not measure success by how many answers they provide. They notice how many meaningful questions the family continues asking together.

Learning becomes something we share, not something we deliver.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Place a journal or a few sheets of paper beside your family's Wonder Bowl or outdoor photographs. Add pencils or crayons and leave the invitation open.

If your child engages, follow their lead. If they do not, leave the materials available without reminding or requiring them. A tool supports wonder only when it remains an invitation.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does our way of documenting feel inviting or obligatory?
- Which tools does my child naturally use to express ideas?
- What discoveries belong on our Wonder Table right now?
- How has appreciation influenced the way our family treats nature?
- When did I comfortably say, “*I don’t know*” and remain curious?

Relationships matter more than products. A blank journal page does not mean the learning stopped.

Become a Family of Learners

Let the Wonder Table Change with the Seasons

Invite each family member to contribute something connected to a recent outdoor experience:

- a nature photograph;
- a journal page;
- a permitted natural object;
- a drawing or poem;
- a flower in a small vase; or
- a book about something the family noticed.

As the seasons change, allow the table to change too. Return items when appropriate, replace books, add new questions, and notice what is different.

Children begin seeing that nature is always changing - and so are they. The Wonder Table becomes more than a display. It becomes a gathering place for stories, questions, discoveries, and shared memories.

Connect Wonder with Family, Culture, and Story

Nature can connect children not only with scientific ideas, but also with family memories, cultural traditions, food, place, and identity.

One suggested storybook connection is ***Watercress*** by Andrea Wang, illustrated by Jason Chin. The story invites readers to consider how something growing in an ordinary place can carry family history, memory, and meaning.

After reading, you might wonder together:

- Does our family have a story connected with a plant, animal, landscape, or food?
- What places hold memories for the people who care for us?
- What ordinary part of nature might hold an extraordinary story?

Books do not replace direct experience. They can help children see that observations connect with larger stories - some scientific, some personal, and some shared across generations.

Give Wonder and Stewardship Shared Language

Two words capture the heart of this brief:

- **Wonder:** The feeling that arises when we notice something interesting and want to understand more.
- **Stewardship:** Caring responsibly for people, places, and living things so they remain healthy for the future.

Use these words naturally. A child looking closely at a seed is practicing wonder. A child leaving a living flower undisturbed is practicing stewardship. Naming these actions helps children recognize the habits already growing within them.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Learning does not end when an adventure is over. Often, that is when new questions begin.

As families revisit discoveries, tell stories, compare observations, and continue wondering, children learn that curiosity is not reserved for special outings. It can appear around the kitchen table, during bedtime conversations, while paging through a journal, or while looking at a pinecone one more time.

Most importantly, children discover that the people they love enjoy learning beside them. Shared curiosity becomes part of the family's story.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Invite each family member to add one contribution to a seasonal Wonder Table. Then gather briefly and let each person share:

- what they chose;
- what it reminds them of; and
- one thing they still wonder.

Keep the conversation informal. The goal is not a presentation, but a shared moment of attention.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- How has our family's attention changed since we began revisiting discoveries?
- What questions have continued across several days or outings?
- What family or cultural story could deepen our connection with place?
- How is my child showing growing care for the natural world?
- What have I rediscovered by learning beside my child?

Families who wonder together become families who continue learning together.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Every Adventure Begins Before You Open the Door provides the preparation, safety, and access context for outdoor experiences. *Discovering Nature's Rhythms* develops careful observation of patterns and change. *Everyday Treasures, Endless Possibilities* offers more ways to revisit discoveries through open-ended creative materials. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Children do not need adults who know everything. They need adults who remain curious.

Every time we pause to wonder, look more closely, ask another question, or say, “*Let’s find out together,*” we show children that learning is not a destination. It is a lifelong journey.

The Wonder Bowl, Nature Journal, and Wonder Table are not projects to complete or keepsakes to perfect. They are invitations to return, converse, compare, remember, and care.

Wonder does not end when an adventure is over. It grows every time we return to it. Appreciation can grow into stewardship, and shared curiosity can become part of a family’s identity.

Families who wonder together become families who continue learning together.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

Research suggests that revisiting nature experiences can support conversation, memory, inquiry, and creative representation, but outcomes depend on the activity, setting, adult interaction, and child. The evidence does not require wilderness travel or expensive materials; a window view, courtyard, street tree, accessible park, or remembered observation may provide a starting point.

- 1 Prins, J., van der Wilt, F., van der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2022). [Nature play in early childhood education: A systematic review and meta-ethnography of qualitative research](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 995164. The review identifies relationships among nature-based environments, educator-child interaction, exploratory play, creativity, and problem-solving while noting limitations in the evidence and participant representation.
- 2 Dankiw, K. A., Tsiros, M. D., Baldock, K. L., & Kumar, S. (2020). [The impacts of unstructured nature play on health in early childhood development: A systematic review](#). *PLOS ONE*, 15(2), e0229006. Findings were generally promising, but measures and study quality varied.
- 3 Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., et al. (2018). [Beyond the 30-million-word gap: Children's conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function](#). *Psychological Science*, 29(5), 700-710. The small correlational study supports the value of responsive conversation but does not show that one particular nature activity causes language development.
- 4 Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*; Cornell, J. (1998). *Sharing Nature with Children* (20th anniversary ed.); and Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori Method*. These influential educational and practical sources emphasize listening, representation, observation, and hands-on experience; their ideas should be adapted rather than treated as universal requirements.

Together, these sources support the brief's invitation to revisit discoveries through conversation, drawing, movement, sorting, storytelling, or further observation. The child may remember differently, decline the activity, or change the subject; adult curiosity should not become a quiz.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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