



SERIES 2 · PLAY, WONDER, AND LEARNING

Caring for the World We Share

How children can contribute to caring for shared places through safe, voluntary, meaningful stewardship without guilt or adult-sized responsibility.

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.

Individual needs, circumstances, and responses vary. Examples, strategies, scripts, activities, and suggested approaches describe possibilities rather than predictions. Resources for Caregivers does not promise or guarantee any particular behavioral, developmental, emotional, educational, health, safety, relationship, caregiving, or other outcome.

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 10-12 minutes

Central idea: Stewardship begins with relationship. When children know and love a place, meaningful responsibility can grow naturally from belonging rather than guilt or obligation.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Help children see themselves as part of the natural world.
- 2 Make cycles, interdependence, and care visible through ordinary experiences.
- 3 Offer small responsibilities that allow children to contribute.
- 4 Let appreciation grow into a lasting identity as a steward.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

Care Together

We have prepared for adventures, wondered together, slowed down to notice, and discovered that nature is full of rhythms and patterns. Another question now begins to emerge:

What do we do with everything we have learned?

Children do not become caring adults because we lecture them about responsibility. They become caring adults because they experience the joy of belonging to something larger than themselves.

When children know a place, they begin to love it. When they love it, they naturally want to care for it.

That is where stewardship begins - not with obligation, but with relationship.

Connected Caregivers can help children discover that every act of care, no matter how small, strengthens their connection with the world they share.

Big Idea: Relationship Comes Before Responsibility

Children are more likely to care for what feels familiar than for what feels distant: a favorite tree, neighborhood park, birds that visit nearby, a garden they helped plant, or a trail they have explored many times.

These everyday relationships help children see themselves as part of the natural world rather than visitors passing through it.

Stewardship is not a lesson we add after children learn about nature. It grows from the relationships they build with it. Just as children learn to care for family members through love and belonging, they learn to care for places and living things through connection.

Relationship comes before responsibility, and responsibility can become joyful when it grows from belonging.

Keep Responsibility Personal and Understandable

Young children cannot fully grasp a challenge as enormous as *“saving the planet.”* They can understand caring for places and living things they know:

- their backyard or shared outdoor space;
- a neighborhood park;
- flowers they helped plant;
- a tree that provides shade; or
- birds and insects they regularly notice.

Children learn best when responsibility feels personal. As they build relationships with the natural world, they begin seeing themselves as part of it rather than separate from it.

The goal is not simply to raise children who know environmental facts. It is to nurture children who naturally ask:

“How can I help?”

That question grows from connection, not obligation. When helping becomes part of everyday family life, stewardship feels less like a task and more like an expression of gratitude.

Notice Life's Cycles

Nature offers visible cycles. Seeds become plants. Plants produce flowers or fruit. New seeds form. Leaves fall and gradually become part of the soil that supports new life.

Children are fascinated by these transformations because they can watch them unfold over time. Gardening or maintaining an appropriate compost system can make these cycles more visible. Fruit and vegetable scraps, dry leaves, grass clippings, and other suitable materials can gradually become compost that supports future growth.

Children discover that natural systems continually reuse and transform materials. As families garden, compost, or simply observe decomposition and new growth, children begin appreciating where food comes from, why soil matters, and how living things participate in larger cycles.

Stewardship becomes something they experience, not something they memorize.

Let Small Actions Matter

Environmental challenges can feel too large for any one family. Children remind us that meaningful change often begins with one manageable action:

- using a reusable bottle or container;
- planting locally appropriate flowers for pollinators;
- picking up one safe piece of litter;
- watering a plant during a dry period;
- starting or contributing to a compost system;
- tending an appropriate feeder or water source for local wildlife; or
- leaving a shared space a little cleaner than before.

No single action solves every problem. Small actions practiced consistently become habits.

Children discover that caring for the earth is not about perfection. It is about participation. Every family can contribute. Every child can help in a meaningful, age-appropriate way.

Recognize How Nature Supports Us

As children care for nature, they also notice how natural systems support human life. Sunlight brings warmth and energy. Trees offer shade. Rain supports gardens and waterways. Pollinators help many plants reproduce. Healthy soil supports the plants that feed people and animals.

Nature is not simply something outside us that needs protection. We live within its systems.

Recognizing this relationship nurtures gratitude alongside responsibility. Stewardship becomes participation in a living partnership with the world around us.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one familiar place or living thing your family already cares about. Ask:

“What does this place give us, and what is one way we can care for it?”

Keep the action small and concrete. You might water a plant, remove one safe piece of litter, refresh a permitted water source, add suitable material to compost, or thank someone who maintains the space.

Repeat the action often enough for it to become familiar rather than treating it as a one-time event.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Which places or living things does my child already know and love?
- What acts of care does my child notice without prompting?
- Is the responsibility small enough for genuine participation?
- Does our language inspire connection or create fear and guilt?
- What natural support does our family benefit from every day?

Caring begins with paying attention. Children often notice a thirsty flower, visiting butterfly, or piece of litter before adults do.

Let Belonging Inspire Stewardship

Welcome Our Living Neighbors

When children begin paying attention outdoors, they discover they are not alone. Butterflies move among flowers. Bees gather pollen. Birds search for food or nesting materials. Earthworms move through soil. Spiders create intricate webs.

Every living thing participates in the larger environment.

Instead of treating insects and other small animals as interruptions, invite children to see them as neighbors that share the same world. Wonder together:

- What is this creature doing?
- What might it need?
- How can we observe without causing harm?
- How does it contribute to this place?

Children begin understanding that care can include leaving living things undisturbed, providing appropriate habitat, and making choices that support the larger community of life.

Create a Pollinator Pocket

One family project is a small **Pollinator Pocket**. Choose a suitable sunny corner of a yard or use containers on a porch, balcony, or windowsill. Select locally appropriate plants - especially native flowering species where possible - that offer food or shelter for pollinators.

Keep the project manageable and follow local growing guidance. Then observe together:

- Who visited today?
- Which flowers seem most popular?
- What changed as the plants grew or the season shifted?
- What other living things use this small space?

Even a small planting can become habitat. Children see that their actions have an effect and that stewardship can help life flourish.

The aim is not a perfect garden. It is a relationship with one small place that the family can know, observe, and care for over time.

Help Children See Themselves as Contributors

Children do not protect places simply because adults tell them to. They protect places where they feel they belong: the park where they collected pinecones, the trail where they watched a caterpillar, the garden they helped plant, or the tree they visit each week.

Belonging inspires appreciation. Appreciation grows into affection. Affection leads to care. Over time, caring becomes stewardship.

This is how stewardship develops - not through guilt or lectures, but through relationships.

When children ask, *"How can I help?"* an important shift is taking place. They are no longer participating only because an adult requested it. They are participating because they care.

Stewardship is no longer simply something they do. It is becoming part of how they understand themselves: **I am someone who contributes.**

Let Hope Grow Through Action

Adults may feel discouraged by the size of environmental challenges. Children offer another perspective: hope can grow through action.

One flower planted, one reusable container, one compost system, one habitat cared for, or one afternoon spent improving a neighborhood space will not solve every problem. Each action can still teach children that their contribution has value.

Meaningful change rarely begins with grand gestures. It begins with ordinary people caring for ordinary places with extraordinary consistency.

Hope is not built all at once. It grows through many small acts of kindness toward the world we share.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one living neighbor your family regularly sees - a bee, butterfly, bird, worm, spider, tree, or flowering plant.

Spend a few days learning through observation:

- 1 Notice where it appears.
- 2 Watch what it does without disturbing it.
- 3 Wonder what helps it thrive.
- 4 Choose one appropriate action that supports its habitat or protects its space.

Let the action grow from what you observed rather than beginning with a generic checklist.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Which living neighbors has my child begun recognizing?
- What does our family do that helps - or unintentionally disturbs - their habitat?
- When has my child acted from genuine care rather than adult direction?
- How can I acknowledge contribution without turning it into performance?
- Which small action gives our family a realistic sense of agency?

Stewardship becomes personal when children can see the relationship between their choices and a place they know.

Become a Steward

Take a Stewardship Walk

Choose one outdoor place your family enjoys: a neighborhood park, favorite trail, backyard, stream, school playground, community garden, or another familiar place.

Begin the way you have throughout this outdoor journey:

- 1 **Prepare Together.** Consider what you need before leaving.
- 2 **Wonder Together.** Ask questions about the living things you discover.
- 3 **Notice Together.** Look for patterns, changes, and connections.
- 4 **Care Together.** Ask, *"How can we care for this place today?"*

Depending on the location, local rules, and what is safe, your family might:

- pick up ordinary litter while adults handle or avoid sharp and unknown items;
- water plants where permitted;

- refill a maintained birdbath or other appropriate water source;
- add compost to a family or community garden;
- plant suitable native flowers with permission; or
- thank the people who care for the space.

Afterward, talk about how the action helped the place and how caring for it felt.

Children discover that stewardship is not a special event. It is one way we express gratitude for places that enrich our lives.

Give Stewardship and Belonging Shared Language

Two words capture the heart of this brief:

- **Stewardship:** Taking thoughtful responsibility for caring for people, places, and living things so they can continue to thrive.
- **Belong:** Feeling that we are an important part of a family, community, and the natural world around us.

Use these words naturally. A child gently returning a log after observing what lives beneath it is practicing stewardship. A child recognizing a familiar tree or garden as *our place* is expressing belonging.

Naming these experiences helps children recognize the identity taking shape within them.

Connect Care with Stories

Books can help children see how one living thing supports many others. One suggested connection is ***Tree: A Peek-Through Picture Book*** by Britta Teckentrup.

As you read, notice the animals that rely on the tree and how the scene changes through the seasons. Then connect the story with a tree or habitat your child knows:

- Who uses this place?
- What changes through the year?
- What might happen if this habitat were not here?
- How can people care for it respectfully?

Stories can help children move from noticing one living thing to understanding relationships within a larger community.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

We naturally care for what we have learned to love.

Connection comes before responsibility. Children who explore nature, wonder about it, notice its rhythms, and appreciate its beauty naturally begin caring for it.

The same is true within families. Children who feel respected, loved, encouraged, and capable are more able to contribute to their homes, relationships, and communities.

Stewardship is another expression of belonging. Rather than demanding care before children feel connected, we nurture the relationship first. Responsibility can grow from there.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Stewardship is not something children memorize. It is something they experience.

As families prepare, wonder, notice, and care together, children begin seeing themselves differently: not simply as visitors in nature, but as participants; not simply as learners, but as contributors.

They discover that small acts - a flower planted, water refreshed, litter removed, or a trail respected - can make a meaningful difference.

Most importantly, they discover that caring for the world begins with caring alongside the people they love.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one place your family visits regularly. Each time you visit, ask:

“How can we leave this place a little better than we found it?”

Sometimes the answer will be a practical action. Sometimes it will be following a rule that protects the place, noticing something beautiful without removing it, or expressing gratitude.

Repeating the question helps stewardship become an ordinary family habit.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Which place does our family feel connected to?
- How has our behavior changed as we have come to know it better?
- What contribution made my child feel capable and included?
- Did our action respond to a real need and respect local guidance?
- How can we continue caring without turning responsibility into pressure?

Stewardship is not about doing something extraordinary. It is choosing to care, again and again, in ordinary moments.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Discovering Nature's Rhythms strengthens observation of patterns, seasons, and change. *Wonder Together: Nature Stories and Empathy* explores perspective-taking through nature-based storytelling. *Learning Lives in the Journey* helps caregivers notice questions, decisions, revision, and learning as they unfold. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Children become lifelong stewards one relationship at a time.

Every adventure, shared question, quiet observation, and thoughtful act of care helps children understand that they belong to something larger than themselves.

Prepare Together creates opportunity. Wonder Together nurtures curiosity. Notice Together builds understanding. Care Together turns connection into participation.

Children do not need the burden of solving enormous environmental problems. They need meaningful experiences that show them their actions matter and that care can be hopeful, shared, and achievable.

People naturally care for the people and places where they know they belong.

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

Studies generally find an association between connection to nature and pro-environmental behavior, but much of the evidence is correlational. A child should not be made responsible for solving environmental problems created by adults, institutions, or industries. Stewardship activities should build agency and belonging without guilt, fear, or compulsory labor.

- 1 Mackay, C. M. L., & Schmitt, M. T. (2019). [Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis.](#) *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 65, 101323. Across studies, nature connection and pro-environmental behavior were positively associated; experimental evidence was more limited than correlational evidence, so causal claims should remain modest.
- 2 Dominguez Contreras, E., & Krasny, M. E. (2022). [Young children contribute to nature stewardship.](#) *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 945797. This perspectives paper argues for authentic, age-appropriate opportunities for children to contribute and explicitly notes that evidence linking childhood nature play to later stewardship remains limited; its project examples were not outcome studies.

- 3 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. The review found promising but heterogeneous evidence across several developmental outcomes.
- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Outdoor play and safety for children in early care and education](#). This guidance helps adults preserve supervision and account for weather, sun, air, equipment, water, and other outdoor risks.
- 5 Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori Method*; Louv, R. (2008). *Last Child in the Woods* (updated ed.); and Cornell, J. (1998). *Sharing Nature with Children* (20th anniversary ed.). These educational, advocacy, and practical works may inspire purposeful participation, but they do not establish that every activity produces confidence or lifelong stewardship.

Together, these sources support offering children safe, voluntary, meaningful ways to care for a place. Adults remain responsible for hazards, realistic expectations, access, and the larger environmental decisions that children cannot control.

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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