



SERIES 2 · PLAY, WONDER, AND LEARNING

Every Adventure Begins Before You Open the Door

How families can prepare for safe, accessible outdoor adventures that offer opportunities for curiosity, shared responsibility, and confidence.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 2 - Play, Wonder, and Learning | 12-14 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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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 12-14 minutes

Central idea: Outdoor adventures can support curiosity and confidence before anyone steps outside - when children help prepare, share responsibility, and explore alongside adults who are willing to wonder with them.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Make preparation part of the adventure.
- 2 Balance safety, stewardship, and joyful discovery.
- 3 Give children meaningful responsibility for what they carry and do.
- 4 Wonder alongside children without needing to provide every answer.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

Prepare for Adventure Together

Have you ever planned a wonderful outdoor adventure only to feel exhausted before leaving the driveway? Someone cannot find their boots. Another child suddenly remembers they are hungry. The water bottles are empty, someone needs the bathroom, and a favorite hat has disappeared.

Before long, what was meant to be a joyful outing begins to feel stressful.

It may seem that the adventure starts when you step outside. In reality, the adventure begins long before you open the door.

Preparation is not simply about remembering supplies. It is about helping everyone feel ready, capable, and excited to explore together. When children help prepare, they become active participants instead of passive passengers. The journey begins with anticipation, curiosity, and shared responsibility.

Children develop confidence when caring adults gradually invite them to participate in meaningful ways. Preparing for an outdoor adventure is another opportunity to learn together.

Big Idea: Curiosity Grows Through Exploration

Children are naturally curious about the world around them. They notice tiny insects moving through the grass, stop to watch clouds drift across the sky, compare the textures of leaves, and ask questions adults often overlook.

Nature invites children to observe with all their senses - to notice, compare, wonder, and explore. One of the greatest gifts caregivers can offer is not having all the answers, but being willing to become fellow explorers.

Together, we can ask:

- *"I wonder why..."*
- *"What do you notice?"*
- *"What do you think might happen?"*

Curiosity does not require immediate answers. It requires permission to explore.

Wonder leads to observation. Observation leads to questions. Questions inspire exploration. Exploration develops competence. Competence builds confidence - and confidence encourages children to keep wondering.

One adventure naturally leads to the next.

Preparation Builds Capability

Adults often think preparation means doing everything for children. Connected Caregivers prepare differently: we gradually invite children to do more for themselves.

Each time children help fill a water bottle, choose weather-appropriate clothing, pack a backpack, or check the weather, they develop skills that extend beyond a single outing. They are learning responsibility, planning, problem-solving, and independence.

Most importantly, they are discovering that they are capable.

Children become confident explorers because trusted adults gradually share responsibility with them. Preparation is not another task to complete before the fun begins. Preparation is part of the adventure.

Create a Family Adventure Ritual

Predictable traditions can build excitement before an outdoor adventure. Your family might have a special song, a silly cheer, a favorite phrase, or its own version of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*:

- *"We're going on a bug hunt!"*

- *"We're going on a bird hunt!"*
- *"We're going on a tree hunt!"*
- *"We're going on a cloud hunt!"*

Children delight in familiar rituals. These traditions signal that something special is about to happen. Years later, a familiar song may bring back memories of muddy boots, tiny discoveries, shared laughter, and time together outdoors.

Those rituals become part of your family's story.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Before your next outdoor outing, give your child one new preparation responsibility. Depending on their age and ability, they might:

- check the weather with you;
- choose between two appropriate layers;
- fill or carry a water bottle;
- find a hat; or
- help place one shared item in the family bag.

Keep the responsibility small enough for success. Offer guidance without taking over. The goal is not faster preparation; it is growing participation and confidence.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Which parts of getting outside usually feel rushed?
- What can we prepare earlier or simplify?
- Which responsibility is my child ready to practice?
- What family ritual could make leaving feel more joyful?
- How does my own pace affect the beginning of the adventure?

Preparing together may take a little longer at first. That extra time is part of the learning.

Prepare with Purpose

Teach Respect for the Natural World

One of the first outdoor lessons children can learn is that exploring and respecting nature go hand in hand. Before leaving home, wonder together:

- What plants and animals might we discover?
- What should we leave where we find it?

- How can we help care for this place while we visit?

These conversations help children understand that being an explorer also means being a steward.

If your area has ticks, irritating or poisonous plants, stinging insects, or other hazards children should recognize, introduce them with calm curiosity rather than fear. Look at photographs together. Notice shapes, colors, and habitats. Explain simple, age-appropriate ways to stay safe while respecting each plant or animal's place in nature.

Children quickly discover that good explorers do more than look closely. They care for the places they visit.

Prepare for Discovery, Not Only Problems

Adults often think first about what could go wrong. Children usually think about what they might discover. Both perspectives have value.

Thoughtful preparation allows curiosity to take center stage. When basic needs have been considered, families can focus on exploring instead of solving preventable problems.

Before heading outdoors, ask:

- Has everyone eaten and packed enough water?
- Has everyone used the bathroom?
- Is everyone dressed comfortably for the weather and setting?
- Does anyone need a quiet moment before leaving?
- Are there location-specific conditions we should understand?

These questions are not about rigid schedules. They help everyone begin feeling comfortable, confident, and ready to learn.

Preparation creates possibilities.

Treat the Adult's Backpack as a Basecamp

Adults are not expected to carry everything, but a well-chosen family bag can serve as a mobile basecamp that gives children freedom to explore.

Depending on the location, weather, duration, and your family's needs, it might include:

- water and nourishing snacks;
- appropriate sun and insect protection;
- a lightweight rain layer;
- a small first-aid kit;
- a blanket or lightweight tarp;
- extra socks or seasonal clothing; and
- a small bag for carrying out anything you bring in.

The goal is not to prepare for every imaginable problem. It is to cover likely needs so the family can remain present to the experience.

Give Children an Adventure Pack

Children often enjoy meaningful responsibility. A small, comfortably fitted backpack can give them ownership while developing planning, organization, and independence.

Rather than packing it alone, invite your child to help decide what belongs inside. Depending on age, ability, setting, and adult supervision, an Adventure Pack might include:

- a water bottle;
- a child-sized magnifying glass;
- a small notebook and pencil;
- a simple guide to local birds, insects, trees, flowers, weather, or animal tracks;
- a paper bag for permitted natural treasures already on the ground; or
- sunglasses or a favorite sun hat.

As children pack, carry, use, and unpack their belongings, they practice responsibility. Confidence grows one manageable responsibility at a time.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Pack together before your next outing. Ask:

- What do you think we will need today?
- What might help if the weather changes?
- What tool could help us explore?
- Who will be responsible for each item?

Welcome practical and imaginative suggestions. Talk together about which items belong in the bag and why. Packing together turns an adult chore into shared preparation and reminds children that capable explorers participate.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Are we carrying what we are likely to use, or packing from anxiety?
- Does my child's responsibility match their current ability?
- What local safety knowledge would help our family explore confidently?
- How will we care for the place we visit?
- What could we leave at home so the outing feels lighter?

Preparation works best when it supports attention rather than competing with it.

Wonder Together

Curiosity Matters More Than Expertise

Perhaps the greatest gift adults can offer outdoors is not information. It is curiosity.

Children do not expect us to know everything. They hope we will notice the world alongside them. Instead of immediately answering every question, we can wonder together:

- *"I wonder why this tree grew sideways."*
- *"I wonder who made these tiny footprints."*
- *"I wonder why these rocks are different colors."*
- *"What do you notice?"*
- *"What do you think?"*
- *"How could we find out?"*

Not every question needs an immediate answer. Sometimes wondering is enough. Sometimes you may look for an answer together later or return to the same place to observe more closely.

Children learn that curiosity is not about already knowing. It is about continuing to ask thoughtful questions and enjoying the process of discovery.

When adults wonder alongside children, we communicate an important message: **learning is something we do together.**

Allow Children to Change the Pace

One unexpected gift of spending time outdoors is that children often become our teachers. Adults may head outside planning to walk a certain distance. Children may spend twenty minutes watching a caterpillar cross the path.

Our first instinct may be to keep moving. Instead, children invite us to slow down.

Learning is not measured only by distance. It is measured by attention. A feather, puddle, spiderweb sparkling with dew, or tiny flower growing through a sidewalk crack becomes extraordinary when we pause long enough to notice it.

Children remind us that curiosity does not require an expensive vacation or elaborate activity. It requires attention. When we slow down enough to wonder together, we rediscover the joy of seeing familiar places with fresh eyes.

Ask Questions That Open Exploration

Open-ended questions invite observation without turning the outing into a lesson or quiz. You might ask:

- What is the first thing you noticed?
- What surprised you?

- What do you think is happening here?
- What looks different from the last time we visited?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- How could we investigate that together?

If your child asks a question you cannot answer, resist the urge to reach for a phone immediately. Try responding, *“That’s a wonderful question. What do you think?”* or *“How could we investigate that together?”*

Sometimes the conversation becomes the most meaningful discovery.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

On your next outing, choose curiosity over certainty. Do not set a learning objective. Instead:

- 1 Follow your child's attention for a few minutes.
- 2 Ask one open-ended question.
- 3 Offer one genuine *“I wonder...”* of your own.
- 4 Leave at least one question unanswered so you can revisit it together.

The aim is not to cover more information. It is to practice shared discovery.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- What captured my child's attention?
- Did I allow enough time for close observation?
- When did I ask a question instead of offering an explanation?
- What did my child help me notice?
- Which question might we revisit later?

Children often become our guides back to curiosity. Their pace can help adults remember how to look closely.

Bring the Adventure Home

Record Only What Helps You Remember

A Wonder Journal can help a family revisit outdoor discoveries. It does not need to become another assignment. Sometimes one sentence is enough:

- *“Today we discovered five different kinds of leaves.”*
- *“Liam noticed the birds became quiet before it rained.”*
- *“Sophia wondered why mushrooms grow after storms.”*

Some days, you may not write anything. Sharing the experience is enough. Children do not need proof that they explored nature. They need the experience of exploring it with people who delight in wondering alongside them.

You might also add a drawing, a photograph, a weather observation, or a question to investigate later. Let documentation serve curiosity and memory rather than interrupting the experience.

Connect New Discoveries with Stories and Information

Books can extend an outdoor question without replacing firsthand exploration. After an outing, look for a story, field guide, or child-friendly nonfiction book related to something your child noticed.

One suggested connection is **National Geographic Kids: *Everything Weather*** by Kathy Furgang. Its focus on clouds, weather patterns, and seasonal changes can help children connect outdoor observations with scientific thinking.

Return to the child's original question as you read. The goal is not to deliver a complete lesson, but to show that questions can lead to more noticing, research, conversation, and future exploration.

Give the Adventure Shared Language

Two useful words capture the spirit of this brief:

- **Stewardship:** Caring responsibly for people, places, and living things so they remain healthy for the future.
- **Explore:** Looking closely, wondering, discovering, and learning something new.

Use these words naturally. A child carrying out litter is practicing stewardship. A child comparing two stones is exploring. Naming these actions helps children recognize the values and abilities already growing within them.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Outdoor adventures offer far more than fresh air and exercise. They invite families to practice curiosity, shared responsibility, careful observation, respect for the natural world, and joyful learning.

As children help prepare, carry appropriate equipment, care for the places they visit, and wonder alongside trusted adults, they develop habits that can serve them throughout life.

They discover that learning is not about having all the answers. It begins by noticing, asking thoughtful questions, exploring with curiosity, and appreciating the remarkable world around them.

Perhaps most importantly, children discover that the people they love delight in learning beside them.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

After your next outdoor experience, invite each person to contribute one thing to a shared record:

- something they noticed;
- a question they still have;
- a quick drawing;
- a new word; or
- a place they would like to revisit.

Keep it brief and voluntary. Then choose one question or place to carry into a future adventure.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- What did we bring home besides objects?
- Which observation or conversation do I want to remember?
- Did documentation support the experience or distract from it?
- How did my child practice responsibility or stewardship?
- What might our family explore next?

The richest adventures are measured not by distance traveled, but by the conversations, observations, and shared discoveries we bring home.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Bringing Wonder Home continues outdoor discovery through conversation, observation, and creativity. *Discovering Nature's Rhythms* develops pattern noticing and adaptation. *Caring for the World We Share* connects outdoor experience with meaningful stewardship that does not place adult-sized responsibility on children. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Every outdoor adventure begins long before anyone steps outside. It begins when families prepare together, children are trusted with meaningful responsibilities, and adults create enough security for curiosity to take center stage.

Preparation creates confidence. Wonder inspires learning. Stewardship develops care. Shared experiences strengthen relationships.

Children do not need adults who know the name of every bird, tree, cloud, or insect. They need adults who are willing to look closely, ask thoughtful questions, protect room for discovery, and delight in learning beside them.

These ordinary moments become extraordinary because they help children see themselves as capable learners, thoughtful explorers, and caring stewards of the world around them.

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

The evidence on nature play is promising but varied. Studies use different definitions, settings, ages, and outcomes, and many do not establish causation. Outdoor experiences should therefore be offered as accessible opportunities for play and discovery - not as a treatment, a developmental guarantee, or a test of family commitment.

- 1 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 possible benefits across physical activity, motor, cognitive, and social-emotional outcomes, but the evidence was heterogeneous and generally low to moderate in quality.
- 2 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 connects characteristics of nature-based environments, educator-child interaction, and play quality; included studies did not represent children with disabilities, which limits generalization.
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Outdoor play and safety for children in early care and education](#). This current safety guidance covers supervision, age-appropriate equipment, weather, sun, heat, air quality, water, and injury prevention.
- 4 Louv, R. (2008). *Last Child in the Woods* (updated ed.); Cornell, J. (1998). *Sharing Nature with Children* (20th anniversary ed.); and Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori Method*. These influential books provide advocacy, activities, and educational perspectives rather than a single tested family program.

Together, these sources support preparing carefully, following the child's interests, and treating nearby outdoor spaces as possible settings for play and inquiry. Families should adapt activities for mobility, sensory needs, allergies, weather, local hazards, cultural knowledge, and access to safe green space.

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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