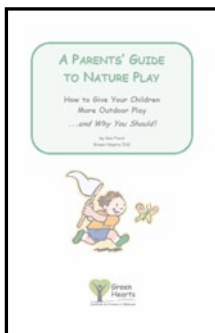


## Now Available: *A Parent's Guide to Nature Play*

Not quite sure what "nature play" is all about, or why it's important? Or maybe you just want a few easy, affordable ideas about how you can bring more nature-based play into your children's lives? Then check out *A Parent's Guide to Nature Play* — an easy-to-digest, 20-page booklet that gives parents a compact but solid introduction to nature play.

Published this year by Green Hearts, the booklet received generous funding support from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD). The *Parent's Guide* was created in collaboration with MORE Nature (see article on back page).



The *Parent's Guide* reviews the benefits of nature play, the three keys to the best quality nature play, and specific landscaping and activity ideas to bring nature play into your own yard. Since its release in June, the printed version of the *Parent's Guide* has been distributed to conservation and early childhood organizations across the U.S., and even as far

as the Yukon Territories, Canada. Also, the Jeffers Foundation of Minnesota has reprinted thousands of copies for distribution in their home state. Links to the *Parent's Guide* have also been added on many websites throughout the United States.

A digital version of *A Parent's Guide to Nature Play* can be read and downloaded from Green Hearts' website for free: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org). Printed copies may be purchased singly for \$3 apiece, including postage and handling. Green Hearts will also sell the *Guides* in bulk (up to 200 copies) at a much lower cost per piece, or — for even larger numbers — can arrange license agreements for re-printing and co-branding by interested organizations and agencies. We want to spread the word about nature play, and will welcome all the help we can get!

For more information or to purchase copies, contact Ken Finch at [kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org), or send a \$3.00 check (for single copies) to Green Hearts (address on page 2).



### Connecticut Nature Center Planning Preschool with Green Hearts' Help

Across the country, more and more nature centers are exploring the possibility of operating nature preschools — an exceptional conservation strategy that is an equally strong approach to early childhood education. This wonderful model places a licensed, professionally staffed preschool in the ecologically rich setting of a nature center, where the enrolled children can explore, discover, and play outdoors every day, in all safe weather conditions. With the kids enrolled for two or more days per week for at least one

*continued on page 3*

## Wilderness, Far and Near

There was a bare puff of breeze. The soft “yank, yank” of a nuthatch. And, twice, a just-perceptible rumble of distant thunder. All else was silence.

“. . . untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” is how the law defines a Federal wilderness area — like the 16,000 acres of Vermont I was sequestered in. Many times I had been such a visitor here — 12 trips, maybe, or 20? — and nearly all as a solo backpacker. But it had been over 20 years, and now I was reveling in the reunion with one of the sacred places in my life. Moments of grace were paired with torrents of memories, all embracing the quietude of Lye Brook and Bourne Pond.

Something in me had begun changing the evening before, when a short burst of coyote song spoke of how alone I was, yet how much I belonged there. When the moonless night later draped my camp, the megaphone of darkness amplified the fall of every acorn and the crinkling of each leaf — harmless, sightless sounds sharpened by the vulnerability of solitude.

As my senses flared, I realized that this was not just nature “untrammelled by man,” this was nature *merged* with man. Or re-merged. Once-firm boundaries were broken down; the inter-species treaties practiced on more-human turf meant nothing here. I still acutely knew my human form, yet felt more animal than I had in years. The sheer wildness of the place was calling out faint echoes of prehistoric instincts that sometimes — in the darkest of nights, or the darkest of moments — rustle far, far down in the cellars of our minds.

Later, in the very early hours, a barred owl seemed to ask, “Who let you in? Who let you in *here*?” And at the first tease of dawn, my eyes snapped open to

more coyote song, and then the ghostly form of a white birch framed by my tent’s screen door — a barrier that had pretended to define my territory during the night.

Breakfast found me atop a boulder at the pond’s edge, where worlds dissolve into one another. Decades before I had shared dinner at this very spot with a beaver who stood in the shallows, barely six feet away, munching on aquatic tubers. We had both understood that the rules were suspended here.

On this morning I again defied the rules by calling out to a distant pair of loons. They were silent; I wanted them to sing. So I tried a loon call of my own. It was a pathetic imitation of that most wild and haunting of bird songs — and I was further mocked by the perfect echo that reverberated back. In my normal life, in my normal haunts, I would never utter such an egocentric cry. What had happened to the rules?

As we grow up in American society, we learn those rules: where, when, and how to be singularly human. At least, that is, our modern manifestation of “human,” which so often stands in separation from nature — and even in defiance of it. We are not born knowing those rules, nor with any pre-established life boundaries. In fact, according to the “biophilia hypothesis” we are actually born with an innate attraction to other life forms, and to the whole of nature.

Sadly, that attraction may not survive today’s childhoods, which seem focused on teaching rules and limitations, rather than on fostering creativity and guiding spiritual growth. What if biophilia is a “use it or lose it” phenomena? If it is not fully activated during childhood, do the odds turn against it ever happening? I believe that is likely.

Today’s parents face a dizzying menu of ways to enrich their children’s lives, to help them become happy, healthy, successful, and nurturing adults. Among those perplexing choices, activating children’s biophilia — i.e., building their enduring bonds with the outdoors — must be near the top of the list. It is a chance — in fact, the *best* chance — to give children the natural world as a life-long friend, as a personal therapist, as a source of constructive adventure, and as an ever-present sanctum. And has anyone ever grown up to regret their young days spent playing in nature?

Nature play doesn’t need a far-off refuge. To kids’ eyes, wilderness exists behind the shrubs that border the fence, and two branches up in the oak tree, and down in the mud of the tiny neighborhood creek. Their epiphanies do not come from beavers and coyotes, but from fireflies, fuzzy leaves, and slimy earthworms. Someday your children’s personal wilderness may comprise thousands of acres, as my sacred place does. But today it is just outside your door or right down the street — and it is every bit as powerful!

### **Green Hearts**

#### **Institute for Nature in Childhood**

*A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization incorporated in Nebraska.*

#### **Mission Statement**

**Green Hearts’ mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.**

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## "Recipe Box" Coming for Nature Play

Green Hearts is currently developing a new resource for parents, educators, and conservationists who want to bring outdoor play back into children's lives: a Nature Play Recipe Box.

This project will produce about 75 "recipe" cards, each presenting one simple strategy for creating more nature play at homes or schools. The cards will be packed in a small cardboard recipe box with a lift-off lid. Green Hearts hopes that the simple, concise format of the nature play recipes will entice parents and educators to quickly get started with one or two easy approaches, and then use other recipe card suggestions to gradually create more layers of nature play experiences for their children.

A generous grant from the Omaha Venture Group is supporting creation of a "beta" (test) version of the project: 100 prototype boxes that will be used and critiqued by parents, environmental educators, and early childhood educators. After incorporating the guidance received from these testers, Green Hearts will seek additional funding to produce the Recipe Boxes in quantity, either as another of our nonprofit resources or possibly as a commercial venture that could help support Green Hearts' overall mission of bringing children and nature back together.

The 100 test boxes are expected to be ready for distribution by the end of 2009. Parents, teachers, and conservationists who are interested in testing and evaluating the Nature Play Recipe Boxes may contact Green Hearts' President Ken Finch directly at [kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org), or 402-344-8711.

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### *Summit on the Value of Play*

In July, Green Hearts' Ken Finch was an invited participant in the first annual "Summit on the Value of Play," held at Clemson University in South Carolina.

Approximately 100 professionals gathered for this initial U.S. effort to elevate our society's view of the importance of all forms of active play. Delegates from academia, governmental agencies, non-profits, landscape architecture, and playground equipment manufacturers worked and shared together, finding common cause in all their work — especially regarding the need for more childhood play. To learn more about the Summit and the U.S. Play Coalition that has arisen from it, visit: <http://usplaycoalition.clemson.edu>.



### **Nature Center Preschool, *continued***

full school year, each child will spend scores or even hundreds of hours in nature, in a close approximation of the kind of nature-based play that their parents likely enjoyed — yet the preschool children always remain under the safe, gentle supervision of their teachers.

In southwest Connecticut, the Ansonia Nature Center (ANC) is fortunate to have an ideal building available to house a small nature preschool. However, they do not currently have the expertise to guide development of a full preschool and its educational program. Recognizing that need, ANC is contracting with Green Hearts to develop a business plan for their future nature preschool, including a basic feasibility study, site and facility recommendations, staffing and operational designs, a three-year budget, and an implementation timeline. Work will begin in December 2009, and should be completed by late winter.

The nature center is eager to get started with their nature preschool, and is excited about its potential as a strong, financially sustainable addition to the extensive selection of programs that they currently offer to the community. Green Hearts is honored to be able to use our experience to help the Ansonia Nature Center get more children outside in nature, more often!

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread,  
places to play in and pray in, where  
nature may heal and cheer and give  
strength to body and soul alike.*

-- John Muir

## *Design Principles for Nature Play Spaces*

In recent years the conservation field has come to understand that children's unstructured, nature-based play is a powerful influence on the development of life-long conservation values — especially when such “nature play” occurs frequently. Simultaneously, research has clearly shown that such frequent, spontaneous outdoor play has largely vanished from American culture.

The convergence of these factors is leading many nature centers and other conservation groups to make concerted efforts to restore nature play to childhood. To date, one of the most common strategies for these efforts is the creation of specific areas for nature play — either by designating existing habitat for that role, by creating sometimes-elaborate “nature playgrounds,” or through a combination of the two. Although many organizations are now using a variety of approaches and philosophies to create such natural play areas, thus far there is no broadly accepted set of “best practices” for this work.

Green Hearts' own efforts in nature play area design have led us to adopt a set of principles and guidelines for that work, which we are sharing with our conservation colleagues — not to try to dictate their approaches, but rather to encourage their own thoughtful design. Among our key principles are:

- ♥ Trust in the inherent play value of nature;
- ♥ Mimic nature closely;
- ♥ Play *with* nature, not just *in* it;
- ♥ Integrate the play space with existing habitat;
- ♥ Emphasize landscape richness, not structures and equipment; and
- ♥ Aim to create lasting friendships between children and nature.

If you or your organization are interested in seeing a complete copy of Green Hearts' *Design Principles for Nature Play Spaces*, please contact Ken Finch directly: 402-344-8711, or [kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org).



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### **Where Have We Been?**

**One of Green Hearts' goals is to help educate both the general public and our professional colleagues about the value and power of nature-based play. This “educational advocacy” work has taken Green Hearts far and wide in recent months. Here's a sampling.**

**Ohio:** 4C for Children conference, Cincinnati: keynote plus two workshops  
Overfield School, Troy: public program  
Cincinnati Nature Center: keynote for major donor dinner; keynote for Head Start program initiative; and consulting on play area design  
Five Rivers MetroParks, Dayton: consulting on play area design

**Colorado:** Children and Nature Gathering, Keystone: early childhood workshop

**Minnesota:** Kindergarden Readiness through Play series, Mankato: keynote

**Tennessee:** American Fisheries Society conference, Nashville: keynote

**New Hampshire:** Association of Nature Center Administrators conference, Holderness: nature play spaces workshop

**South Carolina:** Summit on the Value of Play, Clemson: invited delegate

**West Virginia:** Wheeling: radio interview

**North Carolina:** Natural Learning Initiative, Institute on Natural Play Environments, Chapel Hill: plenary session presentation

**Omaha Area:** Spellman Early Childhood Center: staff training workshop  
Early Childhood Consortium of the Omaha Area conference: keynote  
Morning Rotary: nature play presentation  
KCRO Radio: talk show  
Omaha Children's Museum: parents' workshop  
Henry Doorly Zoo: parents' workshop  
Lauritzen Gardens: parents' workshop  
Fontenelle Forest Nature Center: parents' workshop  
MORE Nature Community Forum: keynote  
Radical Amazement conference, Countryside Community Church: 3 public workshops on kidscaping your yard  
KKAR Radio: talk show  
Omaha By Design, Natural Elements Advisory Committee: member  
MORE Nature Steering Committee: member

## More Kidscaping Tips for Your Yard

A child's view of the world is much smaller and more intimate than that of most of us adults — and this is a key factor in providing nature play for your kids! They don't need spectacular vistas or miles of trails to explore and enjoy nature! Instead, they can be engaged for hours with tiny wonders like earthworms, roly-pollies, and butterflies — or small-scale “landscapes” like vegetable or butterfly gardens.

There's a good chance your own yard or local environs can provide these kinds of attractions, but you can supplement their inherent fun by making sure your children have a few basic tools and toys for nature play. Be sure to keep these handy, so that a bug box can be found quickly when an enticing praying mantis shows up on the back porch! Here are a few suggestions. (*Note:* see our two previous newsletters on Green Hearts' website for more kidscaping suggestions.)

**Magnifiers:** The bigger, the better! Look for ones that are 3 inches in diameter or even larger. Also consider the large “tripod” magnifiers that have three wooden legs — these are great for ground-level wonders!

**Bug Cages:** Kids always love to capture insects such as fireflies, mantises, grasshoppers, and butterflies, so keep a small bug cage on hand. You can buy these in toy and hobby shops, or you can make a simple one from a small cardboard box and a few pieces of window screening. The old classic of a jar with air holes punched in the lid still works well, too! Let your kids get a good long look, but encourage the safe and early release of all captives.



**Nets:** There are nets for catching butterflies and other flying creatures (“air nets”), and there are sturdier, shorter nets for catching aquatic beasties (“dip nets”). Inexpensive air nets are sold in toy and hobby stores; look for ones with long handles and long nets. The preferred catching technique is to get the insect deep in the net, and then gently trap it there by flipping the long net over its circular frame.

Dip nets are handy to have if there's a pond or stream nearby, and you're OK with your kids playing there (or you accompany them). Look for these in science supply stores.

**Earth Movers:** Children love to dig in mud, soil, sand, pea gravel, mulch — or most anything! So be sure yours have kid-sized shovels, spades, rakes, and hoes. Also keep a supply of small buckets and plastic barrels handy for moving that mud around, and consider buying a child's wheelbarrow for those larger jobs!

**Binoculars:** If your children are very young — say, five years or less — the best “binoculars” for them will be a pretend pair made out of two empty toilet paper tubes taped together. These will be fun for preschoolers, and will actually let them begin practicing the art of capturing an image in the small field of vision that binoculars provide.

Older children can begin using real binoculars, but keep the cost to fifty dollars or less. This should get you a decent pair of real binoculars (i.e., not red plastic!) that will do fine for kids. Pay less if you can, because the binocs are likely to get dropped and banged up. A good beginner's size is 7 X 35. Be aware that learning to focus binoculars is hard for young children — and is also hard for you to help with. Practice and patience are essential!

### Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, appreciate the work we're doing, and would like to stay informed about it, please support us with an annual contribution! Every gift truly helps, no matter what size — and every one will be gratefully acknowledged.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Contribution:     \$1,000 Founder     \$100 Supporter     \$25 Grassroots  
                          \$500 Patron             \$50 Contributor     Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this form and your check (made out to Green Hearts) to:

Green Hearts INC, 4502 South 42<sup>nd</sup> St., Omaha, NE 68107-1059

*Thank you!*

## MORE Nature Growing in Greater Omaha

Metro Omaha Resources for Exploring Nature (“MORE Nature”) is a collaborative effort to increase the quantity and quality of children’s nature-based play in greater Omaha. Green Hearts is an active member of MORE Nature’s Steering Committee, which is led by the staff and support of our colleagues at the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD).



During 2009, MORE Nature has organized “Nature Nights” (and Nature Days) at five local schools, has co-sponsored the production of Green Hearts’ *A Parent’s Guide to Nature Play*, and has offered seven Parents’ Workshops on nature play in the greater Omaha area. Green Hearts’ Ken Finch was pleased to lead four of those workshops, held at the Henry Doorly Zoo, Lauritzen Gardens, Fontenelle Forest Nature Center, and the Omaha Children’s Museum. MORE Nature also hosted a community forum to educate and motivate local residents about the importance of nature play. Further, MORE Nature has partnered with the Junior League of Omaha in their “GO! Play Adventure” program, which is challenging and rewarding families to get outside and play at dozens of prime sites in the region.

To further engage area residents, MORE Nature is forming eight Task Forces to create and implement plans for increasing nature play. These groups are now soliciting volunteer help and assistance from all interested community members. If you have a passion for children’s nature play, ideas about it, resources or connections to share, or just time and energy to commit to the future of our children and our planet, then please join in the work of one or more of the Task Forces:

- K to 12 Education*
- Early Childhood*
- Health*
- Promotion and Information Technology*
- After School/Extra Curricular*
- Parks & Recreation*
- Fundraising*
- Home/Neighborhood*

The Task Forces will hold their first meetings shortly after the turn of the year, and are now setting up dates and locations. If you would like to participate, please contact Christine Jacobsen at the NRD: 402-444-6222, or [cjacobsen@papionrd.org](mailto:cjacobsen@papionrd.org).

For further information about MORE Nature, its activities, and its partners, please visit its website: [www.morenature.info](http://www.morenature.info).



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*Bringing Children and Nature Back Together*