

Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

It's time for kids to take a break from the TV and the computer and go back outside!

Find inspiration in the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and take your children or students outside to skim stones, count butterflies or catch-and-release fish. Encourage the kids to look, listen, touch, and smell. Let them take the lead—with their natural curiosity, children will quickly find something to explore.

We invite you to:

- Discover wilderness—prairies, dunes, forests, savannas, and wetlands
- Camp under the stars
- Follow a trail
- Catch and release fish, frogs, and insects
- Climb a tree
- Explore nature in neighborhoods and cities
- Celebrate heritage
- Plant a flower
- Play in the mud or a stream
- Learn to swim

Outdoor activities have been shown to benefit children's social, emotional, and physical development. Young people who grow up spending time in nature are also more likely to be strong advocates for the environment when they reach adulthood. This is important to ensure that the land, water and wildlife legacy we have worked to conserve continues to benefit future generations.

Discover wilderness

Prairies, dunes, forests, savannas, and wetlands

Take a trip somewhere totally new!

There are thousands of places to explore: play in parks and prairies, go rowing in a beautiful lake, pick a pumpkin, and many other things. Most people—including city dwellers—live less than a half hour from a beautiful natural area, and many are much closer. However it's most fun, comfortable, and safe for you—including with a teacher or a group—keep an ear out for opportunities and make a list of all the places you might go. Then check them off!

Discover the wilderness under your feet!

Place a flat wood board over bare dirt. Come back in a day or two, lift the board, and see how many different kinds of animals have found shelter there. You can also just carefully roll over a rock or log. Identify these creatures with the help of a field guide. Usually, there are lots of cool insects, and you might even find an earthworm! Return every month to discover who's new.

Camp under the stars

Go camping!

Some spectacular natural areas nearby allow visitors to camp. Visitors usually have to call ahead to make a campground reservation. Call your local forest preserve district, park district, or state park for information about camping locations and what you'll need.

Camp with fifty friends!

In many towns and cities, park districts offer special camping programs. Some may even let you camp in parks where you wouldn't otherwise be allowed to. Very often these busy overnights include fun games and guided encounters with animals like turtles and frogs.

Check out the moon!

Every night before bed, take a look at the sky. Even in the city, where stars will be dimmer, you can almost always see the moon, and usually a few stars or planets. On a monthly calendar (you can use an old one or even draw a grid yourself), draw the moon as it appears each night. Do you notice any changes? Write down your other observations about the sky. Is it cloudy? Do you see any really bright stars?

Follow a trail

Hide-and-snow-seek!

Even in the chilliest days of winter, there are plenty of animals out and about. Using thick cardboard, draw two animal feet about the same size as the bottom of your boot or shoe. Cut out the foot shapes. Poke holes on the sides of each shape and cut pieces of string long enough to wrap around your boots. Where the ground is covered with snow, take turns with friends being "animal" and "tracker." It's just like hide-and-snow-see, but you'll get practice noticing different animal tracks.



Take a walk!

Pick a short amount of time—even 5 or 10 minutes will do—and go for a family walk. You can observe things, think deep thoughts, talk, or just breathe the fresh air. You'll find some part of nature wherever you go, including your own neighborhood. It may seem way too simple, but plain old walking has inspired many a great naturalist.



Catch and release fish, frogs and insects

Make a bug playground!

Tape together clean, cast-off materials, such as plastic food containers, to build a jungle gym you imagine would be fun for insects.

Next, bring it outside and look around for insects. Be very gentle and pick up bugs safely. (Try using a plastic cup.) Set them on your playground and watch what they do. Do they climb? Are they looking for food? Do different bugs do different things? When you're done, make sure to gently put the bugs back where you found them.



Climb a tree

Be a leaf master!

Try to find as many different leaves as possible in your garden or neighborhood. Together, you can find leaves on flowers shrubs, vines, and trees. If kids want to venture up a little ways up into a tree, parents should spot them. Afterwards, try to identify the leaves you have collected together. You don't have to know the scientific terms—try grouping them into fun categories like "round," "pointy," and "smooth."

Build with sticks!

You may not know it, but you have one of the best toys ever created in your own neighborhood—sticks! Spend a few minutes collecting all the sticks lying on the ground (leave the ones on the trees) and make a big pile. You'll see that there are all kinds: long ones, forked ones, sturdy ones. Use them to build a sculpture, a fort, a beaver dam, or something else.



Explore nature in neighborhoods and cities

Make a neighborhood map!

Draw a map of your block—maybe draw the streets, sidewalks, and alleys first. Then add trees, bushes, interesting weeds, and other natural things. If you're really ambitious, you can draw a trail on your map and try to walk it once a week. Each time you go, write down or draw each bird, squirrel, or colorful bug that you see. Soon, you'll have a record of wildlife on your block in every season.

Make shadow art!

Trace shadows at different times of the day to make interesting patterns and cool artwork. You can draw in dirt with a stick, place seashells on sand, lay wood chips on grass, or whatever you'd like.

Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance that connects people and nature. We are more than 250 organizations that work together to restore local nature and improve the quality of life for all who live here, by protecting the lands and waters on which we all depend. For more information, visit www.chicagowilderness.org. This publication was supported by a grant from the USDA Forest Service and was designed by the Chicago Zoological Society/Brookfield Zoo.

Many thanks to staff from the Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago Park District, Chicago Academy of Sciences/Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, and www.richardlouw.com for their contributions.

Copyright ©2010 Chicago Wilderness. All rights reserved.



Celebrate heritage

Interview friends and family!

Find out what your friends, parents, grandparents, and neighbors know about plants and animals in our area or another. How do they view nature? What plants do they know? What games did they play outside while growing up? Did they have a garden? If you want to, you can record all the interviews in your own journal. You can even add pictures or drawings.

Go fish!

Many parents and grandparents have fond memories of going fishing. Embark on a family fishing expedition: borrow a fishing pole and tackle from friends who love to fish or from your local park or forest preserve district. Soon you'll have your own favorite fishing spot and be able to tell the difference between bluegill, sunfish, and bass. Those who cast a line usually need to buy a permit. Ask your park, forest preserve, or state department of natural resources office about local fishing regulations.



Plant a flower

Plant your dinner!

All you need to grow food is earth, water, sun, and a plant! At your local garden or hardware store, buy a clay pot (\$3), a bag of organic soil (especially if you want to grow vegetables for eating) (\$8), and a starter plant (\$4). (You can also start with seeds, but that takes more work.) For just a little dough, you can grow a basil, tomato, bean or other food-producing plant for the rest of the season. If you want to, decorate the pot. You can also garden outdoors, of course, but make sure to have your soil tested first—many city soils can contain harmful pollutants such as lead.

Scatter seed at home!

Buy a “native wildflower” seed mix packet (about \$4) and scatter the seed on bare soil in the sun in your yard or a pot (not a wild preserve). Keep it watered and observe what comes up. To give the flower patch a neater appearance, you can build a simple border around it using bricks, rocks, sticks, or timber—be creative with whatever's near at hand. You can even keep your plants company with sculptures from art class!

Play in the mud or a stream

Be a watchful wader!

The next time you're near a gentle stream or pond, try taking off your shoes and socks and dipping your foot in. What do you feel? Are there plants? Is the bottom made of gravel, muck, or what? Do frogs go hopping away? A parent should closely supervise, and kids can hold a parent's hand for balance. In some places, it's often a really good idea to keep your shoes or sandals on, because there can be sharp objects on the bottom.

Dip a net!

Bring a bucket and a fine-meshed dip net to your local pond. Fill the bucket with some pond water. Next, stick the net in the water. Get it down in the weeds and muck and then quickly pull it up and out of the water. Turn the net over into the bucket and see what drops out. You might find water bugs, crayfish, minnows, or tadpoles. When you're done looking at them, dump everything back so your discoveries can go back to their aquatic business.



Learn to swim

Take swimming lessons!

You can sign up for inexpensive swimming lessons at your local pool. Once you do, you'll feel a lot more safe and comfortable playing around near ponds, lakes, and streams. Before lessons start, you can help your child feel comfortable in the water by playing together in a shallow wading pool or splashing in the tub.



Board a boat!

After you can swim, another great way to experience the water is by boat. Never done it before? Don't know where to find a boat or an appropriate water body? Many park and forest preserve districts have programs. They'll set you up with a canoe, paddles, life preservers, and pointers to get you going the right direction—and back!

Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights



20 Ideas for FUN and EASY Activities for Kids and Parents



leave no child inside
a chicago wilderness initiative