



## Outside Isn't Canceled: 12 Ways to Get Your Kids Outdoors and Away from a Screen

By Emily Schoenfelder, University of Illinois Extension, 4-H Youth Development Educator

It's no surprise to most of us that our kids could do with less screen time. Although we are forever grateful to the creative teachers and resourceful schools that successfully adapted two months of curriculum to virtual delivery, the season left our heads reeling with Zoom meetings and Google hangouts. Times of stress and uncertainty persuaded us to find information, comfort, and sanity in news feeds and binge-watching our favorite shows. But as our state begins to open back up and our lives return to some semblance of normal, it's time to pull our kids (and ourselves) away from our devices and head outside.

Beyond the benefits of less screen time, the mental, physical, and emotional benefits of spending time in the natural world are well-documented. Research has linked spending time in nature to a plethora of positive results, including: reduced levels of depression and anxiety, decreased inflammation, improved motor skills, increased stress resilience, lower rates of obesity, better problem solving skills, decreased blood pressure, enhanced attention and focus – even better eyesight. In short: Go outside! Here are 12 ideas for what you and your kids can do once you get there.

- **Square Foot Hike** – Take a 4' piece of string, a piece of paper, a writing utensil, and (if you have one) a magnifying glass to any outside location – a garden, the woods, your own backyard - wherever. Shape the string into a square on the ground. Then, spend at least 10 minutes observing the things in your square. What do you notice about the ground covering? Do you see any insects, and if so, what are they doing? What kind of plants are growing? Record your observations on your paper as lists, drawings, stories, or other creative interpretations.
- **Catch Fireflies** – Nothing creates kid-in-summer nostalgia like chasing these magical, living twinkle lights; seeing them glow in your hand; then watching them fly away.
- **Start a Garden** – Whether you have a huge yard that you can dig up, or a few tin cans that you can set in a window, anyone can be a gardener. All you need is soil, seeds, sunlight, and water. By starting a garden, you and your children can grow your own food, add to the beauty of your environment, create habitats for wildlife, and be responsible for other living things. You can find more horticulture resources from the University of Illinois Extension Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit website at [extension.illinois.edu/global/horticulture](https://extension.illinois.edu/global/horticulture).
- **Cloud Spotting** – Take a few moments for mindfulness and imagination. Lie in the grass and look up at a blue sky speckled with clouds. What do you see?

- **Play Pick-up Sticks** – Wander through your yard, your neighborhood, or a local green space to find and collect a bunch of small sticks (three or four handfuls should be plenty). Drop the sticks into a jumbled pile, then take turns with the other players as you each attempt to remove one stick from the mass without disturbing any of the others. You'll be amazed at the fun you'll have!
- **Make a Birdfeeder** - Take an empty toilet paper roll, spread peanut butter on the outside, and roll it in birdseed. Then, hang it outside and observe the many species of avian friends that might come visit. You can even report your observations as a citizen Scientist to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at [www.birds.cornell.edu/citizenscience](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/citizenscience).
- **Take a Walk** – If this seems too run-of-the-mill, add some new elements. Try counting how many items you see: cars you pass, dogs on leashes, cracks in the sidewalk – anything! Or try to make it through the entire alphabet by naming things you see that start with each consecutive letter, like a-airplane overhead, b-baby in a stroller, c-cardinal in a tree. Or make your outing a service project by picking up litter.
- **Star Gaze** – Pick a clear night, go outside, and look up. The millions of twinkling stars never cease to amaze. And if you'd like to learn more, Peoria Riverfront Museum's Dome Planetarium offers virtual shows and information at [www.peoriariverfrontmuseum.org/dome-planetarium/virtual-planetarium](http://www.peoriariverfrontmuseum.org/dome-planetarium/virtual-planetarium). Plus, there are lots of apps that can help you identify what you'll see in the night sky. Try the NASA App, Star Chart, or Sky View Lite to get started.
- **Mud Painting** – Throw on a swimsuit or play clothes and find (or make) a mud puddle. Use the mud as an artistic medium and your skin as the canvas. Use a paint brush or your finger to draw fun mud designs on your arms and legs. Clean up is as simple as running through the sprinkler or under the hose. Still too messy? You can use paper instead.
- **Blow Bubbles** – What is it about these little, floating orbs that brings such joy? Try to find out! If you've somehow tired of your regular bubble play, try making your own bubble wands. Pipe cleaners, straws, yarn, wire hangers, and toilet paper rolls are great materials to experiment with. For more ideas, check out [exploratorium.edu/search/bubbles](http://exploratorium.edu/search/bubbles).
- **Nature Rubbings** – Improve your observational skills and make works of art with nature rubbings. Simply place a natural object – like a leaf, flat rock, or pine needle – under a piece of paper. Then, rub the broad side of a crayon over top. It's texture and outline will show up, leaving beautiful impressions. You can use a variety of objects and colors to make lovely collages.
- **Build a Shelter** – Practice your architectural and survival skills by using natural materials to build protection from the elements. In the woods, you may be able to find fallen branches and bark to help. In your backyard, you may want to use old sheets, towels, or ropes to supplement your structure. Neither of these an option? See if you can gather enough twigs and leaves to build a small house for a mouse – or a fairy.

Would you like to learn more?

- Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv - [richardlouv.com/books/last-child/](http://richardlouv.com/books/last-child/)
- Citizen Science Database and Info - [www.citizen science.gov/#](http://www.citizen science.gov/#)
- National Park Service - [www.nps.gov/kids/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/kids/index.htm)
- University of Illinois Extension – [extension.illinois.edu/fmpt](http://extension.illinois.edu/fmpt)

### **Photo cutline**

Spending time outdoors provides a myriad of benefits for kids and adults. Even activities as simple as watching clouds can have tremendous mental and physical health benefits.

*Photo by Anita Wilkinson, University of Illinois Extension, Communications Coordinator*

**About 4-H:** Illinois 4-H strives to help youth learn skills for living. University of Illinois Extension provides 4-H programs in every county in Illinois. Illinois 4-H aims to impact the lives of 200,000 youth each year through sustained learning clubs and groups and short-term programming.

### **For Further Information Contact:**

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