

GREENING OUR KIDS

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

Psalm 23:2-3

Scripture is clear. Lived experience echoes that wisdom. Research undergirds both. What's that? When kids get out in nature, they meet the Creator, who has some wondrous gifts to bestow: faith formation, reverence for the creation, beauty, support for kids' learning, stress relief, and joy. And it's not just for children! All of us benefit from time in nature.

Yet, we read that kids don't often go outside to play, to daydream, to explore, to experience. Why? Some kids are so scheduled with other activities, that unless it is an outdoor sports field, they simply don't have the time. It's easy in our type A, uber-busy world to ignore our need for time in the creation. For others, they are spending time indoors on "screen time," an average of seven hours a day with television, computer, DS, smart phone, Game Boy, or a dozen other compelling screens. For some kids, the neighborhood is not a safe place to go out and play, so parents and caregivers and street wisdom says, "Stay inside. Stay safe." Some latchkey kids, who come home to no adult, stay inside for safety's sake at their parents direction. Yet others have no green space within walking distance of their homes.

So, why is it important to get our kids outdoors into the green? What is to be gained?

- Experiences in the creation bring us heart-to-heart with the Creator, who declares this beauty created for us to care for and enjoy. It provides a wonderful opportunity to talk about God, to see God's love and care for us expressed in the creation.
- Beauty is essential to living deeply and experiencing awe and wonder.
- When we are outdoors, creativity and imagination are fostered. Green spaces are an invitation to explore, to ask questions, to learn about the creation.
- Recent research underlines the importance of spending time in nature for all learning. "Green time" expands attention span, lowers stress, readies learners to be open to learning, aids retention of what is learned, and helps kids of all ages settle in and be centered, ready to learn.
- "Green pastures" are more than just a place to run off some of that energy and work out the stress. Even without physical activity, just being outdoors in nature lowers stress and anxiety and helps all be receptive to learning.
- Children who spend time in nature are more likely to develop a reverence for the creation and to be committed to caring for God's creation.
- Often, the loving adult who accompanies the child in nature is also in need of stress relief, focus, and restoration. This is the perfect setting to deepen the relationship between parent, grandparent, or other loving adult and the child.

It is God's gift, God's invitation, God's intention to meet us, with the children we love, in creation and restore our souls.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Find a "new" green space in your community, a place that your family has never explored before. Let your child identify the things that delight them. Make a collection, draw pictures of the experience, or take photos to remember the place.
2. Take "God walks," a stroll with child and adult. Listen to the child to hear what they see in nature for which they are especially thankful to God. It's a wonderful opportunity to outfit our children and youth with a lens of faith, noticing God's presence everywhere.
3. Experience the outdoors at an unfamiliar time of day - early in the morning, after the moon and stars are out, in the rainstorm or snow storm. What do you notice that is different from this perspective?
4. For a child challenged with attention issues, take a walk before going to school or before sitting down to do homework.
5. Encourage your child's school to build in "green" breaks during the day.