

May Parent Corner: Spring Has Sprung: Outdoor Activities for All!

Well, we made it past a gray, cold, mildly wet winter and spring is almost here. Already the weather is warming up and we are seeing signs of *Spring*. Now is the perfect time to stretch your child's knowledge and experience by noticing and experiencing the weather, plant, and animal changes that take place during spring. Spring is the time for new beginnings; the start of a new season, plants beginning to re-emerge and flourish, animals start their families and prepare for warmer weather and you and your family can get out of the house and lose that cooped-up feeling. There are many ways to incorporate nature and the changing season into activities for you and your children, both at home and in your community. They need not be expensive or elaborate. . .many families are keeping tight budgets, have lost a job or may otherwise be enjoying getting back to basics with their family-spending family time together is the point!

Begin at home, young children base their early experiences and identity primarily with their immediate family, friends and neighborhoods. Start by talking with your child about the different clothes they are now choosing to wear; lighter long sleeves or even short sleeves during the day, sweaters and sweatshirts instead of heavy coats, tennis shoes and sandals instead of boots and even shorts for some of us. It's time to put away that heavy winter gear and lighten up. Also at home, begin noticing the changes in your pets, the dog or cat begins shedding heavy fur and is spending more time in the yard or perhaps sunning on the deck. Have your children help them along with regular brushing and grooming, as well as taking them for walks that provide exercise for the animal you and your child. As you spend more time outside, begin to notice and point out changes in your plants and garden, changes in the neighborhood and parks. The following ideas will help you get started on a fun and creative spring with your family.

- **Spring Cleaning:** Many of us begin spring with a good spring cleaning, so involve your children as much as possible. Children need to know they are contributing members of a family, that they have a place and are needed. It is also important for children to have responsibilities and jobs to help them feel valued and to know that they are not just a visitor in the home and that Mom and Dad are not there to serve them or wait on them. Children as young as two or three can help and should have jobs; sweeping the porch, brushing the dog, pulling weeds, vacuuming, dusting, washing low windows, washing patio furniture, making their beds. . . well you get the idea. Jobs should be age appropriate, explained, and done with the parent until the child can succeed by him or herself.
**** Just a reminder, a child cannot do the job as well as an adult, getting them involved, moving, out of the house and helping is the point.
- **Car Wash:** Spend an afternoon washing the car and bikes together. This gets you out of the house, spiffs up the car and readies bikes for your first spring ride!
- **Gardening:** Children love to garden, it is a natural way for them to move, experiment, explore and create, also, they love to eat what they have grown. Older children can help plan the garden and decide what plants, herbs and vegetables to grow. A few child-sized tools help your child take ownership of the garden and know what is safe for them to use. If you have a yard, begin by preparing the soil- weed, dig, work in composts and nutrients, plant bulbs, seeds, veggies and flowers. If you don't have a yard, large pots can provide a good space for growing flowers and vegetables, or perhaps you could look into a community garden in your neighborhood. Depending upon where you live, you may need to start your seeds inside and let your child nurture, water and watch them grow in the house, before transplanting them together outside. Don't forget to involve our children in the weeding, watering and harvesting of the plants as the months go by, to prolong interest in the garden.
- **Nature Walks:** Take walks whenever possible, go to parks or other natural settings in your community; the river, orchards, trails, forests, botanical gardens, ponds and streams, etc. Notice the weather and neighborhood changes, gather nature items to bring home and make into nature collages or mobiles.

- **Bugs, bugs, bugs:** Children love insects and other creepy, crawly, creatures-spring is the best time to explore insects and go on bug hunts. Have bug boxes or other clear plastic jars available to store the insects, then go exploring; under rocks, in soil, spider webs, plants, bark and trees, and on and on. Make worm farms or get an ant farm if your child is really into bugs. Talk about how insects differ; arachnids vs. insects vs. beetles, where they live, how they move, what they eat, look at them with magnifying glasses. . . etc. Afterwards, stress to your child kindness to animals, that insects are living creatures also, and to release the creatures back into nature, where they can live normally.
- **Climb Trees:** Choose trees on your property or at Grandparents that look safe, are strong, and not too high or difficult for your child. When up in the tree look at the branches just budding out, get the feel of the tree now while it is relatively bare from the winter, talk about what is happening to the tree in spring, how it is changing. Then later in spring or early summer, climb the same tree and note the changes, how it feels to be completely engulfed in leaves and shade, what it smells like, what fruits or foliage look like.
- **Puddle Jumping:** Yes, there probably will be more rain and spring showers. As adults we forget how much fun it was to jump in rain puddles. Go ahead, bundle up, put on old shoes or better yet galoshes or rain boots if you have them, and go for it. Your child will have a ball doing what comes naturally. Afterwards, come inside dry off and have something warm to drink with the kids, while explaining that you OK'd this activity for today , that they should not do puddle jumping without you!
- **Fun on Wheels:** Get out those bikes, trikes, skates, wagons, or whatever has been gathering dust all winter and put them to good use. Go on a family bike ride or go skating together to start off spring.
- **Water play:** Even though it may be still to cool to swim comfortably, you can let your child have water play in low bins or dishpans. Provide a variety of plastic bottles, cups, funnels, bowls, tubes and scoops for pouring, measuring, dipping, etc. You can also color the water with food coloring for an added change.
- **Bubbles:** Buy or make bubbles (Dawn or Joy dish washing liquid with a bit of sugar and water), get out bubble wands, straws for blowing, tubes, pipe cleaners (to form your own wands), strawberry baskets, anything that will work to blow through and create different bubbles. Gather the children – they will do the rest!
- **Spray Paint Murals:** Fill handle squirt bottles with colored water (add food coloring or washable paint), and spray large pieces of butcher paper or newspaper clipped to a fence. Children love to create and will enjoy blending colors on a large scale, with the size of your mural paper as their only limitation.

Lastly, when exploring outdoors in early spring/summer/fall, don't forget sunscreen and protection from insect bites. Sunscreen should be applied liberally throughout the day, as well as natural or store bought protections from pests. To help with sun protections; wear broad brimmed hats, long sleeved shirts, long pants, and layers that can be removed as it heats up.

Mosquitoes, biting flies, arachnids and ticks can cause annoying bites and sometimes a serious disease. Mosquito and tick bites can spread infections, bites from spiders and biting flies are painful and may cause a skin infection or can be toxic. You can lower your chance of being bitten by an insect or spiderlike animal (arachnid) by using insect repellents, (***Do NOT use DEET on infants younger than 2 months & DEET reduces how well sunscreen works by one-third***), picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus (both natural repellants).

Enjoy!!!

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