

Chapter One

NURTURE THROUGH NATURE

Many ask if it is nature or nurture that defines a child; I think it's this –

Nature (N) + Nurture (Nt) + Natural World (Nw) = Child (C)

$$C = N + Nt + Nw$$

The good news is you don't have to be a scientist, mathematician or naturalist to figure out this equation, as nurturing a child's bond to nature is a simple and natural process. You will soon be surprised at the life-enhancing benefits it can have for you and your family. We are not alone in doing this, of course; many mammals nurture their young in this way as it is essential for the survival of a species.

This book is essentially about being a human parent as we discover that it is not in the best interest of our infants to turn their attention away from what naturally sustains them; in doing so we could unwittingly be sealing the fate of future generations and even the survival of our own species.

Having been fascinated by the chemistry of how infants develop a bond with nature, my research led me to the work of greater minds than mine:

For much of human evolution, the natural world constituted one of the most important contexts children encountered during their critical years of maturation. It would not be too bold to assert that direct and indirect experience of nature has been and may possibly remain a critical component

in human physical, emotional, intellectual and even moral development. (Kahn and Kellert 2002, p.vii)

After eleven years of observing this in my own children by nurturing through nature from infancy, I am of the opinion that both parent and child can gain valuable knowledge through this process.



EXAMPLE: If a bird is seen in the garden gathering nest material (and I don't have to know what type of bird it is) I will softly call out to my children and point it out. If they are interested in having a look (and they naturally are) they join me and we quietly wait in the hope of locating the nest site. This triggers many questions; for instance, they may wonder about the bird's choice of material for its nest. When they were younger they were more inclined to follow my suggestions and rush off to try to find out what type of bird it was; being particularly keen to share their knowledge they would quickly return with their thoughts or findings. Other times I would join them and help with the identification and I soon discovered that my own knowledge was being enhanced in the process of educating my children.

What became apparent is how naturally they brought nature into their lives daily. As they grew their continued casual interest in birds led them to become aware of when certain birds would appear in the garden or when they would leave to migrate. This introduced them to the seasons, climate, oceans, distance and an awareness of other countries; their knowledge soon surpassed mine. I'm pretty good at finding oceans and countries on a world map but my children now have a tendency to find them first!

I knew they were not only learning but also retaining knowledge just by what they were relaying back to me during conversations, and they would incorporate this knowledge into their play daily.



EXAMPLE: When my son was younger and needed help to trim his fingernails it would often be a reminder for him to share the fact that our nails were made out of the same substance that a rhino's horn is made of. On each occasion he would repeat the fact in the same way and this would be a trigger for us both to look again at our nails and talk about them further. I would often ask him if he could remember what the substance was called and we would remind ourselves: keratin.

By being mindful and observing nature daily in their nurturing I have come to understand that there is a natural balance of respect that occurs between a parent, a child and the natural world when it comes to learning. A child asks questions or points out something of interest and a parent responds. In return the parent searches for items of interest to introduce to the child. I do this by focusing on the natural world, as I have always instinctively felt that it shouldn't be left out of the nurturing equation. As a family we simply enjoy observing and trying to understand what we see happening in the natural world and include it in our daily conversations; this includes questioning the more unusual as well as the obvious. A young child will soon develop an awareness that the smallest of species in nature is as extraordinary as the largest.

We are born ready to be nurtured and introduced to our natural environment. From the moment of birth we instinctively know how to get attention: we cry and expect a response and we develop facial expressions that can be read by our parents.

What is also clear to me is that we can nurture a habit to be mindful of the natural world, and this develops in both parent and child through the nurturing process.

My own children have grown up knowing that the curiosities of the natural world can be shared, and they will call for me or their father if they see something that interests them, be it outside, on their laptops, in a book or magazine or on the

television. Being mindful self-fuels their interest, especially as they can now also view the natural world via technology. Any one of us can trigger a discussion as we discover and share what we read, see or think about, and as a family we continue to gain knowledge this way.



DISTRACTION: My children have just counted the number of starlings that are currently in the garden; they make quite a racket (the starlings, not the children). There are over a dozen.

I have referred to being ‘mindful’ of nature in this chapter and this is important. In today’s modern world we are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of easing stress, and mindfulness is one way to achieve this. When children learn at home they are naturally mindful and focus on the moment; it’s the adults around them who sometimes need reminding, myself included.

The modern world of parenting is a busy environment and there are so many demands and distractions that are difficult to ignore. What I can comfortably say is that I’m mindful of my children. I’m mindful of them and their needs, and that’s essential. You can only nurture through nature if you take the time to establish a habit of observing it and show your children how important it is to protect and respect it. I will always endeavour to stop what I’m doing if I spot a nature distraction in order to point it out to the children.

To enable young children to develop a natural respect for nature we may need to show consideration when purchasing items such as wasp killer and ant powder, for instance. It’s in the interest of our children that we should maintain our own curiosity for nature even if there are times when we feel bothered by it.

With a nature-fed education at home and no sign of natural history being introduced to their school curriculum, it was really no surprise that my own children felt confident enough to walk away from their schools in 2014 with a great sense of relief.

I took much pleasure in watching the habits of birds, and even made notes on the subject. In my simplicity, I remember wondering why every gentleman did not become an ornithologist.

Charles Darwin (1887)