

Sharing Nature Activities

For Families and Youth Groups

By Joseph Cornell and Janet Barlow



A spider web glistening in the sun, the trusting call of a chickadee, the spicy smell of a pine forest in the rain...

Many of us have treasured memories of the natural world and want to share nature's beauty with the children in our lives.

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, a book by Richard Louv, tells of the many challenges we face in bringing children back to nature: extended hours of "screen time," lack of physical activity, and a general alienation from nature.

For thirty years the Sharing Nature Foundation, founded by Joseph Cornell, has helped children all over the world feel close to nature. Sharing Nature uses fun and engaging activities to give children joyful and profound experiences of the natural world.

The following activities are easy to do, yet touch children deeply. Parents, community leaders, and anyone who lives, works, or volunteers with children will find that these activities can greatly enhance any outdoor adventure.

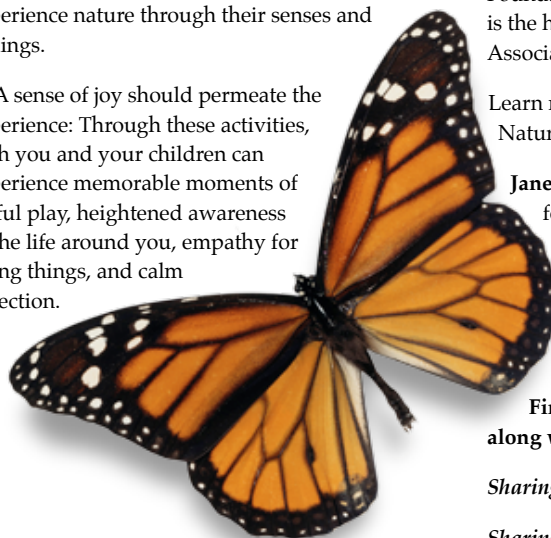
These abbreviated activity descriptions are drawn from Joseph Cornell's *Sharing Nature with Children Volumes I & II*.



Sharing These Activities:

Two important points to keep in mind as you share these activities:

1. Teach less, share and experience more: Let Nature be the teacher as much as possible. Resist the urge to spout off facts and everything you know about what you see. Focus first on helping children experience nature through their senses and feelings.
2. A sense of joy should permeate the experience: Through these activities, both you and your children can experience memorable moments of joyful play, heightened awareness of the life around you, empathy for living things, and calm reflection.



Note: Read through the activities a few times before leading them with children.



Joseph Cornell

Joseph Cornell is one of the most highly regarded nature educators in the world today. His award-winning Sharing Nature Books have been translated into twenty languages and have "sparked a world-wide revolution in nature education." In 1978 Joseph Cornell founded the Sharing Nature Foundation to spread his work around the globe. He is the honorary president of the Japan Nature Game Association, an organization of over 10,000 leaders.

Learn more about Joseph Cornell and the Sharing Nature Foundation at www.sharingnature.com.

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Sharing Nature Resources

Find detailed descriptions of these activities – along with many more – in the following books:

Sharing Nature with Children

Sharing Nature with Children II

Order them online at www.sharingnature.com.



Bird Calling

Bring birds to you with this simple call.

of people: 1 or more
Ages: 4 years and up
Props: None
From: Sharing Nature with Children

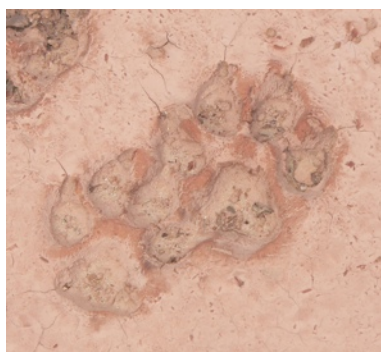
In an area where you're likely to see or hear birds, try this bird call to see how many and what types of birds you can attract. Wait quietly until you hear birds nearby. Kneel or stand without moving near some shrubs or trees. They will partially hide you and give the birds somewhere to land.

The call is a series of repeated "psssh" sounds. Try different rhythms to see what works with different birds. Here are a few to start:

psssh..... psssh..... psssh

psssh..... psssh..... psssh-psssh.....
 psssh..... psssh

Each series should be about three seconds. Pause after three or four rounds to listen for incoming birds. Small birds will respond right away or not at all.



Camera Game

Children remember their "pictures" for years.

of people: 2 or more
Ages: 3 years and up
Props: Index cards & pencils for each person
From: Sharing Nature with Children II

Have the children pair off. One player is the photographer and the other is the camera. The photographer guides the camera, who keeps his eyes closed. The photographer searches for beautiful and interesting photos.

The photographer points the camera's shutters (eyes) at the object or scene he wants to "shoot" and then presses the shutter button to take the photo. You "press the shutter button" by tapping the camera's shoulder once to open the camera's shutters. Two taps tells the camera to close his shutters.

The photographer should close the shutters after 3 to 5 seconds. Try creative shots: different angles, close ups, panorama shots, etc. While taking photos, it's best to talk as little as possible.

Give photographers about 10 minutes to take at least three photos. Then the pairs switch places. When everyone is finished, have each child use an index card and pencil to draw a favorite photo they took as the camera. Share the photos in a group.

Have younger children be partnered with an adult or older child.



Meet a Tree

See if you can find your tree again.

of people: 2 or more
Ages: 4 years and up
Props: Blindfolds for each pair
From: Sharing Nature with Children

Have the children pair off. One partner is blindfolded and the other leads him through the forest to a nearby tree.

The "blind" partner then explores his tree to feel its uniqueness. Tell children to, "Rub your cheek on the bark... Is this tree alive?... Can you put your arms around it?... Can you feel roots and branches?... Is the tree older than you are?... Can you find plants growing on it?... Animal signs?... Lichens?"

When the "blind" partner is finished exploring, the other partner leads him back to where they began by an indirect route. The "blind" partner removes the blindfold and tries to find the tree with his eyes open. Suddenly, what was once a forest

becomes a collection of very individual trees. Partners change places so that both have a chance to meet a tree.





Unnature Trail

This game challenges children to look closely.

of people: 1 to 30
Ages: 5 to 13 years
Props: Man-made objects
From: Sharing Nature with Children

Look for a trail going through an area with small and large trees, leaf litter, rotting logs and some other plants. Mark the beginning and end of a 65 to 100-foot section of the trail (make sure it's wide enough for two people to pass). Secretly hide 16 to 20 man-made objects along one side of the trail beforehand. Some should stand out (brightly colored balloons or fluorescent pink cockroaches). Others should blend with surroundings (a nail, rubber band, clothes pin). Keep the number of objects you've planted a secret.

Have the children walk over the section of trail one at a time, trying to spot as many objects as they can. They remain quiet and do not pick up the objects or point them out to others. Have them whisper in your ear how many objects they saw. Tell each child the total number of objects, and have them walk the trail again, trying to find more.

After two rounds, go to one end of the trail and have them tell you where the objects are, picking them all up as you go. Discuss how camouflage and coloration helps animals hide in the woods. Then go on a search for small camouflaged animals (insects, spiders, etc.).



Interview with Nature

See life from another perspective.

of people: 1 or more
Ages: 5 years and up
Props: Index card & pencil for each person
From: Journey to the Heart of Nature

Have each child choose a nearby plant, rock, or animal that he feels has an interesting story to tell. It should be within 20 or 30 yards from your central gathering place. Each child spends 10 minutes on his interview.

The child asks it questions as if he were interviewing a person. Ask things like, "How old are you?... What events have you seen in your life?... What is it like living here?... Is there something special you would like to tell me." The children write or draw (depending on their ages) the answers to the questions they ask on the index card.

Gather the children back together again and have them share their "interviews" in small groups.



Sound Map

Listen to and record the sounds of nature around you.

of people: 1 or more
Ages: 5 years and up
Props: Index card & pencil for each person
From: Sharing Nature with Children II

Select a site where your group is likely to hear a variety of nature sounds, such as a meadow, forest or marsh. Each child finds a special listening spot nearby and settles down with their pencils and index cards.

Have the children mark an X in the center of the card. This marks where they're sitting on the sound map. When they hear a sound they should make a mark on the card to symbolize the sound (for example: wavy lines for wind, musical note for a bird, etc.). The mark's location on the map should indicate roughly the direction and distance of the sound.

After explaining the sound map activity, have everyone listen for five to 10 minutes. After the time is over, have everyone gather together and share their sound maps.

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Silent Sharing Walk

Commune with nature and each other.

of people: 1 or more
Ages: 5 years and up
Props: None
From: Sharing Nature with Children

This activity involves walking quietly together down a trail. The silence and harmony of this activity, especially at dawn or dusk, creates an awareness that we share the world with all living things.

Explain to the children that they should follow you quietly down the trail without talking. The idea is to blend into the forest so that animals will not run away from you, but stop to look at you instead. You are entering their world as co-members, rather than as outsiders, and nature will accept you as part of itself.

Begin by sitting down in silence for a few minutes to calm and quiet yourselves. Then lead the children

down the trail. When someone sees or hears something he'd like to share, he signals the others with a gentle tap and points to what caught his attention. Walk for however long the group is able to stay quiet. Try for at least 10 minutes.

Safety Tips

Be mindful of safety when in the woods, at the stream/lake side, or near the ocean. Bring along water, snacks, and a small first aid kit (and know how to use it). Tell someone else where you are going and when you plan to return. Be mindful of those with allergies, limited mobility, or medical conditions. Be aware also of poisonous plants and harmful animals.

Instruct children to be very careful when leading partners who are blindfolded or have their eyes closed. The sighted leader should take his partner's hand and gently pull an arm in the direction he wants to go. He should walk slowly as he lead his partner around, telling his partner when to duck under a branch and when to lift his steps over a log or root. Before playing the Meet a Tree or Camera Game, make sure the children are mature and calm enough to lead each other responsibly.

Hand out props after you've explained the main points of each

activity. This will ensure that the props won't distract the children from hearing your instructions. Have the props ready at hand and give them out quickly so the activity flows well.



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