

# **KIDS AND CREATION:**

## **Helping kids to find solace in nature during COVID-19 (and beyond)**

By Ruth Wivell

*“In times of crisis, the natural world is a source of both joy and solace. The natural world produces the comfort that can come from nothing else.”*

David Attenborough

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **A bit about me**

Hi, I'm Ruth. I am originally from Aotearoa New Zealand and have lived with my family in the USA, Germany, and Scotland. In 2019 we moved on to country traditionally cared for by the people of the Darug nation, and--as I have found everywhere we have lived--we feel most settled as we gradually become acquainted with the natural world we find ourselves in.

Among other things, I have run community gardens and facilitated programmes helping inner-city children access nature. I have also learned a lot from taking my own children to forest education programmes, like [Timbernook](#) and [Mud Pies](#). You can visit my blog to read some of my poetry, sermons, and reflections that circle around many of the ideas in this resource: [Slow Growing](#).

I am passionate about helping people to recognise that they are a part of the natural world--that nature is not something 'out there' or a car trip away, but in us and around us. To me, this is the first step towards learning to love and care for creation. We love those around us--our children, friends, elders--because they are a part of us and we of them. We learn to love them simply by caring for them and showing them love. It is similar to our relationship to the earth; when we recognise that we are a part of creation,

then we can make decisions to notice it, to be in close proximity to it, to care for it. This is when we realise we are actually showing it love.

I hope this resource will not just give you ideas of activities to do with your kids, but also some sense of the philosophy behind why it is so important.

### **Connectedness to nature and one another during periods of uncertainty and insecurity**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our normal lives. We adults are worried about our immediate safety as well as our personal and collective future. Whether they understand them or not, even the most resilient and secure child will have picked up on their adults' fears and anxieties since COVID-19 came on the scene.

Now, more than ever, children need a sense of safety and security. And so do we adults! Feelings of security and safety come not from the absence of danger, but rather from a sense of connection. Children seek this connection with the people in their lives, and oftentimes we can offer it to them.

But what if many of us are so stressed and anxious that we feel we don't have the internal resources to offer deep connection to our children when they need it?

I have experienced this struggle. For an eighteen month stretch, when my children were really small, we lived in a tiny inner-city flat with a misanthropic neighbour who made it clear he didn't want us living there. It was the opposite of what we are experiencing now: my home was not a safe place to be. So I took my children out to the commons for hours on end.

Ultimately, when I think back on that period, I do recall the trauma of feeling unsafe in my home, but I also remember the comfort that nature gave us when we most needed it: the beech tree that dropped so many nuts I didn't have to head home early for snacks; the bumblebee we observed making its own secure nest in the moss; the river that flowed around my feet, healing my soul.

Simply put, in the times when I have not had the energy to forge connection with my children, I have outsourced to nature.

The rewards have been manifold. I have felt more connected to myself and my children as nature has facilitated our interactions. I have felt my fears dissipate as my body becomes more grounded in creation. And most wonderfully, as my children have pattered about, befriending beasties, immersing themselves in imaginary play, and

naming the plants around them, I have watched them grow in love for their environment. Just as we experience being connected in and with creation, our love for it--and one another--is magnified.

Over the years, I have often returned to [Richard Louv's modern classic, 'Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder'](#) and found encouragement to notice the natural world around me and my family. This has been especially helpful when access to nature has not been easy and when life has been overwhelming. This quote highlights the spiritual and emotional benefits that children who are able to have contact with nature experience:

*"For children, nature comes in many forms. A newborn calf; a pet that lives and dies; a worn path through the woods; a fort nested in stinging nettles; a damp mysterious edge of a vacant lot--whatever shape nature takes, it offers each child an older, larger world separate from parents. Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighbourhood. It serves as a blank slate upon which a child draws and reinterprets the culture's fantasies. Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of the senses. Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion. Nature can frighten a child, too, and this fright serves a purpose. In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace."*

### **The challenge to connect with creation wherever we live**

The season of COVID-19 is highlighting the disparities between those who can immerse themselves in nature and those who struggle to find a green space to be in. Some of us will have large and unruly gardens that offer much solace, others have apartments that have stunning views skimming the tops of houses all the way down to the sea. Others have access to safe public land, some only have small balconies or an alleyway as their main outdoor space.

Whatever space you have, Louv notes that to develop a relationship with nature, we need daily contact with it. This means that there are more benefits to spending time everyday in the muddy puddle by the grassy verge in the lane than spending a weekend in the mountains once a year (although, of course, being in vast natural environments is very good for the soul).

I hope that some of the suggestions in the next part of this resource will encourage you to notice the natural world immediately around you, wherever you are right now.

## ACTIVITIES THAT CONNECT US

### **Gratitude, remembering, and dreaming**

During the times when we feel quite separate from the natural world and we are unable to immerse ourselves in it in the way we'd want to, we can think of our longing as an expression of our love. In the same way we think about loved ones we cannot be with, we can actively remember times we have spent in nature, and dream about the future.

- **Meditate on the gifts of nature that you have now**, making the choice to see the abundance and not the shortcomings: the bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter, water that runs from the tap and over your hands as you wash them, sunlight streaming in the window and across the wall, the sound of cockatoos screeching through the sky, the slight breeze that your balcony door lets in. Practise this daily, and notice the effect time has. What birds are screeching through the sky at night? How has the light in your kitchen changed since breakfast?
- **Tell stories.** Tell creation stories: how did the earth come to be? How did the frog or the child come to be? Tell stories from your childhood: about the animals you loved, or the places near home you went to to be by yourself, or getting in trouble for climbing trees at the botanic gardens. Tell stories about the things you miss doing in nature that you were able to do in this season in 2019: swimming in the sea and feeling the seaweed brush your legs or sitting under trees at the local park while the ibises sneak up on your piece of cake.
- **Read, write, and sing about nature.** Access to books is a little tricky right now with libraries closed, but if you are thinking of buying some, why not consider looking for those that celebrate the natural world? Or you and your child could write your own words in poetry, song, or book form. [Make a mini magazine](#) and write about your favourite creature, etch poems about trees into broad leaves, build a song or a chant about the animals you can see from where you're sitting.

### ***Book recommendations:***

[‘Rockhopping’](#) and [‘Rivertime’](#) by Trace Balla; [‘Young Dark Emu’](#) by Bruce Pascoe; [‘Tiny Creatures: the world of microbes’](#) by Nicola Davies; [‘The Lost Words’](#) by Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris; [‘My Side of the Mountain’](#) by Jean Craighead George; [‘The Birchbark House’](#) by Louise Erdrich; [‘Leaf Stone Beetle’](#) by Ursula Dubosarsky; [‘Seedfolks’](#) and [‘Joyful Noise: Poems for two voices’](#) by Paul Fleischman; [‘Sand Swimmers: The secret life of Australia’s dead heart’](#) and [‘Home’](#) by Narelle Oliver; [‘Walking to Corroboree’](#) by Anne Kerr & Rhanee Tsetsakos, [‘Michael Recycle Meets Litterbug Doug’](#) by Ellie Bethel and Alexandra Colombo, [‘The Lorax’](#) by Br. Seuss, [‘Here We Are’](#) by Oliver Jeffers, [‘This Moose Belongs to Me’](#) by Oliver Jeffers, [‘The Whale Shark Song’](#) by Sadie James, [‘Tuart Dwellers’](#) by Jan Ramage, [‘Circle’](#) by Jeannie Baker, [‘Jeemuluk’](#) The Young Noisy Scrub-Bird by Corinn Wallace Hine, [‘The Little Corroboree Frog’](#) by Tracey Holton-Ramirez and Angela Ramirez, [‘Penelope The Mountain Pygmy Possum’](#) by Gordon Winch, [‘A Tale of Two Honey Possums’](#) by Felicity Bradshaw, [‘The Shy Mala’](#) by Liliana Stafford, [‘Phasmid: Saving the Lord Howe Island Stick Insect’](#) by Rohan Cleave and Coral Tulloch, [‘The Tantrum that Saved the World’](#) by Megan Herbert and Michael E. Mann.

**Music recommendations:**

[‘The Lost Words: Spell Songs’](#); [‘Second Nature’](#) by The Wilderbeats; [‘Little Seed: Songs for children by Woodie Guthrie’](#) by Elizabeth Mitchell; [‘Best of Raffi’](#) by Raffi; [‘See!’](#) by Holly Throsby.

## Bringing found natural objects into your home

Plant and seed sales have sky-rocketed since the pandemic began, and there are now many more pet-owners. These are wonderful ways to learn to care for and love non-human beings. But if you do not have capacity in your life for an animal or even a plant, there are other ways to bring nature into your home.

- **Collect.** On your next sanctioned walk down to the supermarket, collect a few stones, seed pods, leaves, or sticks to bring home. Display your treasures on a window sill, shelf, or even a dedicated table--somewhere little hands can reach to admire and arrange. We blu-tack sticks that look like dancing people to our wall, add any colourful feather we find into a bowl, and have a ridiculous pile of stones by our back door. Some treasures are so precious (like a perfectly intact bird skull) they go in a little box to come out on special occasions.
- **Play with your collection.** A bowl of feathers at my house has been used to spell out messages across the floor, as sails for boats in the bathroom sink, and to 'improve' the aero-dynamics of paper darts. A jar of special stones (perhaps from the driveway!) offers hours of sorting and stacking. Seed pods can be served up at a teddy bears' picnic. Pinecones are often used as projectiles for all sorts of homemade contraptions.
- **Use some of your collected treasures for art and craft projects.** [Decorate stones with lovely melt-y crayons.](#) [Or decorate stones with individual facial features](#) to 'build' faces with. [Wrap sticks with colourful wool.](#) [Or turn your sticks into magic wands.](#) Incorporate flowers into [playdough](#) (non-toxic options include—violets, pansies, calendula, marigolds, mint, rosemary, and roses). Give the kids some glue or blu-tack and see what creations they can make out of leaves and twigs.

## Delving into deep time

Nature gives us a sense of chronos (or 'clock time') that can be restorative. Consider the hope we get as we move through the natural seasons, for example. We are excited for summer days as we long to swim at the beach. Or we look for the quenching rains of autumn after months of parched land.

Nature too, can take us out of chronos and into God's kairos—a numinous or divine time, sometimes called the 'supreme moment' or a state of 'flow'. The natural world does not go at the same pace as the rest of our modern, civilised lives. It does not distract us in the same way, or propel us forward, onward, upward. It doesn't expect productivity from us. Because of this, as Richard Louv notes, nature amplifies time.

A Timbernook teacher once told me that it takes half an hour for kids to get into deep, independent play. Each time an adult interrupts with their 'good ideas' or conflict resolution strategies, that half hour starts all over again. Adults may notice a similar pattern in their own work, especially if it is creative work. When you are in 'flow', you have a deep connection to yourself and those you are working with, as well as a sense of being connected to something larger.

Some hints to access this space:

- Wander. Sit. Move in a way that is not linear and purposeful. Simply potter about until something catches your eye. The short way of saying this, of course, is 'pretend you are a two year old on a walk'.
- Allow yourself and your kids to experience and move through boredom, and/or the sense of 'what on earth am I doing here? This is silly.' On the other side of that is where you are likely to find that time begins to warp. From there you might just make it into a supreme moment...
- Try and find something that interests you rather than trying to get your kids interested. They are more likely to be drawn into deep play of their own if they observe you in a deep space of your own.
- Think twice before speaking into your child's/children's play. Give them an extra moment or two than you usually would before intervening--they might just figure out their own conflict or problem and they will remain present in their own play.

While many of the activities below are actually about noticing time pass (and therefore are more an exploration of chronos), you might find that you are drawn into a supreme moment as you lose track of clock time.

- **Go out at nightfall or daybreak.** An evening walk around the block or some time on the balcony offers engagement with a whole constellation (literally!) of things that

children often miss out on. It's truly magic! My family has some rituals that involve walking in the dark, like taking the wheelie bins 500m to the main road or heading for high ground when there's a full moon. There are fewer people out at sunrise and night-time, so for those who have weaker immune systems, it can be a good time to explore the streets (although, stay safe in other ways).

- **Do a scavenger hunt in the dark.** Have you found that your other senses notice more when your eyes are not so dominant? How many different smells do you notice? What kind of sounds do you hear? What animals can you hear/see/smell? Observe nocturnal birds and mammals waking up for the night. Watch a spider create her web--over a series of nights you will notice that her body size will change according to how successful her web is. Can you identify any stars or planets? Apps like [Star Walk 2](#) or [Sky View Lite](#) will help you see the sky in a new way.
- **Attract night animals.** Lay a piece of white paper or cloth down outside and shine a torchlight on it. Watch as moths dance in the light. Or make a 'room' for a spider to spin a web--tie three sticks into a triangle formation, hang/prop it somewhere, and return to it after a few days to see if a spider has taken up residence there. Remember just to look at it with your eyes and not your hands.
- **Notice light and shadows as you go through the day.** You might become more aware of why you prefer to sit in one part of the garden in the morning and another in the afternoon. Make shadow art. Place a large piece of paper in a sunny spot, and arrange one or two toys so they cast a strong shadow across the page. Outline the shadow and colour it in. Or you could outline the shadow at different points throughout the day and see how the shadow morphs.
- **Make transient art and watch what happens over time.** Collect leaves and [make a mandala](#). Lie out on the concrete when the rain begins to make rain-angels. Paint the trees or stones with mud, clay, and ashes mixed with water. Scratch patterns into the earth with a stick. [Paint concrete](#), hot from the sun, with water and a big brush. Draw outdoors with chalk. Make '[spirit faces](#)' from clay and hide them in the landscape.

## Remind your body of itself

During these times, the natural world can feel like it is something ‘out there’, away from us. This is especially true when we are spending so much time indoors and sitting at screens.

But remember that you are a part of the natural world. You are a created being. Wherever you are—in a state forest or in your tiny inner-city apartment with no view of trees—nature is too.

While we are so grateful for the technology that allows us to stay connected with those we love and participate in our faith communities, we are a people who follow an incarnate and embodied Christ. With this in mind, I encourage you to do things that remind your body of itself.

- **Spend some time observing your children and copy their movements.**

Children are so free and ‘in their bodies’ in a way that most adults have forgotten how to be. So, copy the masters! A textured, natural surface (like sand or grass) can feel better than your floor but do it wherever you can. Getting up and down off the floor, bending over to peer between legs at the upside-down world behind, dancing in a free and un-self-conscious way. It’ll make you feel ridiculous, but it’s a good work-out, your children will have a great time with you, and it is good for the soul.

- **Dance like animals!** It doesn’t have to be as perfect as Swan Lake. Find some short nature videos, play some music over the top of them, and copy the movements the animals do. Walk like a [cassowary](#), box like a [kangaroo](#), do ballet with a [red-back spider](#). Lip-syncing to birdsong is also fun--you can really put your whole body into a kookaburra laugh!

- **Consider giving your home an experimental make-over to allow for more indoor movement.** When we lived as a family of four in a small city flat, we decided not to get lounge furniture. There was more room for the kids to play on the floor and it made our living room seem lighter and more spacious. In addition, we slept on the floor so that our bedroom was also a place to play in the daytime. If your body would struggle to make it down to the floor and back again, consider smaller rearrangements. Even moving your everyday dinner plates or glasses to a low shelf—requiring you to bend or squat to reach them—will give your body a change from the movements it is used to doing over and over. For some other ideas for connecting with your body in your home in this way, check out [this article about the home of biomechanist, Katy Bowman](#).

- **Similarly, think about the movements that your children are missing from their usual lifestyles and see if you can improvise for those movements to happen indoors or in your garden.** Balance is a critical part of movement. A long stretch of tape stuck on the floor can be the beginning of a balancing activity. A piece of 4x2 directly on the ground or elevated on two phone books ups the stakes ever so slightly. We also make wobbly obstacle courses out of cushions and islands
- **Sensory play helps children to make sense of the world around them.** For a relatively easy-to-clean-up indoor option: empty one or two of your panic-bought bags of dry beans into a large container. Set it on a sheet on the floor. Your kids might like to use kitchenware (like ladles, pots, measuring spoons) to 'cook' with or make little habitats for their toy animals. Some kids (and adults too) find it very therapeutic just letting the beans run between fingers or over feet. To clean up at the end, draw the four corners of the sheet together and funnel the dry beans back into the container for another play-time.

## Walking

I've been delighted by how many more people are walking with their families in the bushland near my home. When my kids are complaining about walking, or I feel lethargic and can't motivate myself to step out, I find it is helpful to remember that 'heading out for a walk' for exercise or fresh air was not something my ancestors would have done. Walking was a necessary part of life that rewarded us with food or safe accommodation. With this in mind, I am quite happy to 'sell' a walk to my kids with promises of ice-cream, beautiful views, a swim, or [*insert your bribe here*]. The exercise and inhalation of fresh air will take place (not to mention the many other benefits of walking outdoors) whether they're a part of the marketing campaign or not.

Here are some other strategies I like to use:

- **Scavenger hunts are great.** [Here's one that works for an Australian context.](#) You might like to see how many different kinds of lichen or mushrooms you see. Or how many different bird sounds you can record. I give my kids 10 points every time they see fox scat (they haven't yet asked what the points are for).
- **Geocaching is a world-wide treasure hunt.** People plant caches, locate them on [the app](#) with a clue for finding them, and then the hunt begins! This is a very addictive activity but I will mention that I have sometimes found the search a bit frustrating--in some cases the clues are too hard, or the cache is lost. I recommend making sure that the cache you search for is current and check the feedback to get a sense of whether you might find it with your small assistant/s.
- **Rainbows, teddies, or painted rock finding** is a lovely activity to do on your city walks.
- **Lots of snacks!** Both little snacks, like trail mix for the trail, and something lovely for the end point. I am partial to a thermos of hot chocolate (or an icy drink for a hot day). If you are a confident forager, you might be able to collect on the way something to make tea with.
- **'Hungry Bear' game.** Nominate the bear who walks ahead of the rest of the group. The bear then shouts, loud and slow: 'I'm getting hungry! 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5!' while everyone hides. The bear must stay where they are to try and spot his 'food'.
- **'Hot-warm-cold' game.** One person runs ahead to hide a small item (like a Lego person). The others have to find it while the hider uses the hot-warm-cold clues.

## Grounding and earthing

There's something magical that happens when we are able to step over the threshold of our homes and be outdoors. But it doesn't always have to be an event: I find that 'little and often' can also be the trick on the days that won't allow for a long bushwalk.

- **Take your indoor work out.** We think nothing of taking a book outside to enjoy in the shade of a tree. What about other things we can take outside? Can you take your Zoom meeting or Skype conversation out to a shady spot in the garden? My son has schooling-from-home work that can be done outdoors. He has been doing his reading comprehension and mathematics activities sprawled out on a blanket. I can answer any of his questions while I weed the garden--bonus!
- **Take your food preparation outside.** We often think of food preparation as being an indoor activity because that is where our kitchen is. But we can do some of it outside. Sometimes I will take out my big chopping board and a picnic rug to cut veggies for dinner. When I do, my kids tend to follow and find their own things to get up to around me. Like make fairy houses out of found things or make their own mudpies. My favourite thing is to cook food over fire (restrictions permitting). Sausages and marshmallows are especially easy, but simple meals like [veggie ragu](#) or [beef stew](#) are great.
- **On the topic of food, think about taking your food back one step in its processing and do it with your children.** Do you buy peanut butter? Why don't you grind your own in the food processor? Do you do that already? Why don't you buy a bag of nuts in their shells and spend the morning cracking them together? We take them outside and crack them with rocks, making a competition out of who can extract the most intact nut. Shelling peas or broad beans is fun for a small child. Taking the outer layers of Brussels sprouts or chopping the ends off green beans. Peeling potatoes and cutting mushrooms. There are so many jobs that a supervised child can do in the kitchen that connect them to nature—our food source, our life source.
- **If your home has no outdoor space, perhaps one of your rooms has a nice view that relaxes you.** Can you temporarily set up a work space there? If not, can you make a spot you can visit a few times during the day, perhaps for a cup of tea, or to make your personal calls from? See if you can get a long view and stretch your eyesight to the end of it--our eye muscles need using just like any other muscles in our bodies. Use whiteboard markers to draw on the window. Make plans to explore the farthest corner of your view when COVID-19 rules are less strict.

## Naming and caring

Robert MacFarlane says that if we lose the names for the natural phenomena around us, we lose the ability to see them. If we lose the ability to see them, then we cannot care for them.

- **Learn the names of the plants and animals around you.** Have you noticed how some kids are amazing at identifying the brands of food items at the supermarket, or the makes of cars in the carpark? These kids are often also very good at identifying trees, bush tucker, birds, and reptiles. On your next walk together or on a lazy afternoon in the garden, see if you can identify a new-to-you creature or plant.
- **Start foraging for edible plants in the area around you.** Many weeds that grow in urban areas are edible. Pick up a guide, frequent a [helpful website](#), or join a [Facebook group](#) to begin learning about what is growing in your area. Make sure you harvest ethically and sustainably, and stay safe by only eating plants you are 100% confident of their identity.
- **Participate in citizen science that relies upon the general public identifying local plants and animals.** [Frog ID](#) and [Butterflies Australia](#) are two apps that you can use at any time to identify frogs or butterflies. In addition to telling you what they are, this information is sent to the scientists researching the species. If you see a powerful owl, let the [Powerful Owl Project](#) know. Events like the [Aussie Backyard Bird Count \( always in October, 19-25 October in 2020\)](#) and [BioBlitz](#) (organised as needed) are large-scale citizen science projects. Check out [Atlas of Living Australia](#) and see if there are any projects on the go that you could learn from or participate in.

## **'The Peace of Wild Things' by Wendell Berry**

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

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