

## Nature Map your Neighborhood

Leave Google Maps at home and ask your child to create a natural map of the neighborhood. Using only natural landmarks like trees, bodies of water, gardens will help them really focus on wildlife and the surrounding nature.



## Why Your Child Should Try Nature Photography

If your child insists on grabbing for your smartphone, put it to your advantage and let them use it to take photos of the natural world in action.



**If your family walk suggestions are met with a lack of enthusiasm, or if your little hikers like to be kept busy during nature time, then introduce the journey stick on your next hike.**

When Aboriginal people of Australia went on journeys, they collected objects along the way, tying them to the stick in chronological order. When they returned home, they used the stick to remember their journeys and relay the story of their journey to friends and family.

A journey stick is a great activity to do with children as it helps them focus on their surroundings, learn about nature, keeps them busy, and results in a wonderful handmade (free), customized souvenir from their trip.

Making journey sticks is a wonderful new habit for your child to adopt. They can create one each time they hike or have an outdoor adventure, keeping them to remember what they saw and felt along the way. Perhaps they saw a fruit tree in blossom or noticed new buds showing on our native trees shiny. Or else spotted a double acorn as they watched squirrels dig up their winter cache. The object will serve as a connection to your child's experience and the natural world.



To make journey sticks, you don't need to bring much along. Just take some string or ribbons (precut or with a pair of scissors) or else rubber bands to attach objects to the stick.

Tell your child what a journey stick is, how it was used by Aboriginal people and how they can use it and make it. Then let them set out to find their perfect journey stick. The size they choose is up to them. I've had children make large hiking stick sizes, small pocket size sticks and everything in between.

The natural objects should be gathered naturally along the hike. The stick is not the objective of the hike. It's a beautiful souvenir but the point is still the experience. Your child should focus on being present for the hike, deeply tuning into their surroundings, noticing what's around. This will help them develop their observation skills, detail-noticing abilities, and curiosity.

Befriending a tree is a great way for your child to learn about one of the most important living things on this planet— and one that is likely just outside their door. By becoming a friend to a tree, your child can learn not only about the vital role of trees, but they will develop an appreciation for these dependable but dynamic organisms. Visiting their tree year-round and noticing how it changes from season to season, will also help them tune into local ecology as well.

Your child can befriend their tree and start their tree observation in any season. Don't worry about starting when there are leaves or flowers on a tree, you can learn a lot from a bare tree.

Head outside and ask your child to choose their tree. Ideally, the tree will be close by so your child will have lots of opportunities to visit it and observe it daily or weekly. But if you have to, head to a more wooded area. Tell your child to choose the tree that personally appeals to them. This doesn't have to be the tallest or prettiest tree. In fact, selecting a tree that they might not notice ordinarily is probably a great choice!



The first thing for your child to do is to sit quietly or stand near their tree, taking it in. They could start by listening to the sounds the tree makes as the wind blows its leaves or the lack of sound. They should tune into the sounds of the environment such as woodpeckers nearby or cars. Next, they could look around to carefully take in the tree's surroundings. A few things to notice might be: Are there other trees nearby? Is it in a wooded area? Is it alone, isolated, surrounded by concrete? Are there natural or manmade objects closeby that are (or could) interfere with its growth? Will it grow up against electrical wires eventually or hit a neighbor's roof? How tall is the tree? How wide is the trunk? What color is the bark? What is its shape? Does it have leaves? How many branches does it have? Are there any animals occupying it? Do they see nests in their branches? Are the branches full of leaves or bare? Are there any insects using it?

Now your child could focus on the condition of their tree. Do they see oozing sap or notice fungus growing? Does the trunk look strong and sturdy? Do they notice new growth? Trees should produce new growth every year. Did you know that you can check the amount of growth by measuring the distance between this year's and last (where

growth scars on the branch are). Every tree species grows at a different rate, so take this into consideration when helping your child check a tree's growth.



As your child scans the tree trunk and limbs, ask them to notice if there are cavities, cracks, and holes. Cavities are caused by broken branches or pruning. Animals and insects often inhabit tree cavities as they provide excellent shelter. Are there any burls on the tree? A burl is a tree growth in which the grain has grown in a deformed manner and results from a tree undergoing some form of stress such as insect infestation and certain types of mold infestation.

Does the tree have broken branches? A healthy tree will not have many dead or broken branches. Try this test: snap one twig off a branch. Living twigs bend while dead twigs break.

Now they could look up and study the tree's crown. If the tree has leaves, do they notice bare patches? Ask them to look at the leaves. Healthy leaves (or needles in the case of evergreen trees) could be plentiful. Do they notice any holes in the leaves? Are there signs of insects?

In springtime, your child can look for the tree's seeds, when seeds and leaves are produced. Each tree has a different seed and it is one of the easiest ways to identify what kind of tree it is. Now it's time for micro-observation. Tell your child to take a closer look for the next few minutes and zoom in on the tree's details. Do they see moss or fungus? Ask them to look at the bark of the tree. The outer bark is the tree's protection from the outside world. A tree produces new bark each year and new wood. If you have a magnifying glass, let them use it to look closely at the patterns of the

bark, noticing the color. Is the bark strong? Loose or peeling bark on a tree's trunk and branches is a sign of weak bark.

Now that your child has carefully observed their tree bid farewell for now. Ask them to decide on a day of the week for weekly observation and checking in on their friend, just as they would for a pet.