

Tips for Parents: Spring activities help to build kids' appreciation of outside world

Along with warmer weather and greener landscapes, the onset of spring brings numerous outdoor opportunities for parents to bond with their children, says Kansas State University child development specialist Bradford Wiles.

"There's just all kinds of really cool activities and opportunities to support our children's development in a conscientious and forward-thinking way," Wiles said.

Wiles said outdoor learning can be very simple.

"Here's an example: You know more about a tree and its (growth) system than a child could possibly know," said Wiles, who is also a parent of young children. "You understand that the bark protects it. You understand that it turns the sun's energy into nutrients and energy. You understand it's got a root system.

"Young children don't know these things, and so you don't have to be an expert arborist to be able to say these things and to talk through these things. So, recognize that you have expertise beyond your children's developmental level."

Wiles said parents can be creative when planning outdoors time with their kids. Some suggestions include planning a scavenger hunt, or perhaps a bingo-style game in which kids must find certain objects in order to fill their card. Earthworms, anyone?

"One of my favorite things (as a parent) is to try to find different kinds of leaves," Wiles said. "And if you don't know what the leaf is, that's okay. There are plenty of apps for that as well as you can just take a picture of the leaf and use Google to see what kind of leaf that is."

Another activity, Wiles adds, is to count "how many different birds you see or hear."

"The world is out there for you. And children are very curious about it. One of the things that parents can do in all of those things is talk through what happens if we don't treat our planet well. When we don't treat our planet well, those birds aren't here. They've gone further north because they can't handle being near the equator. They can't find things to eat."

Earth Day is recognized on April 22 in the United States. Many other outdoor activities can help spur children's learning and awareness toward protecting the world around them.

"For years now, I have made it a policy to pick up at least three pieces of trash whenever I go outside," Wiles said. So wherever I am, I make it a point to always bring three pieces back. And so, organizing a bunch of children to do that is a lot of fun. It gives them a sense of purpose and recognizing that they're cleaning up and then maybe you talk about recycling."

Wiles said parents can also find opportunities to learn from their children, who are growing up in a world where sun and wind energy are more common. On rainy days, look for educational books or videos that cover the benefits of protecting the Earth's natural resources.

"We don't want this to seem like doom and gloom for the children; you never want to make them feel bad," Wiles said. "But there are great opportunities to talk through serious things in a safe and cool way while you're learning some things."

This type of interactive learning, Wiles said, “can not only help you understand your child more - which is always valuable information -- but can also help you understand what they need to advance and be able to make those changes and advocate for the things that we know are going to be really important as they grow.”