

Backyard Environmental Learning Activities for Kids and Families

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Awesome at-home projects provide both academic and vitamin D enrichment



Take the classroom outside!

The physical and mental health benefits of spending time outdoors are well documented. In this time of physical distancing, gaining those benefits is both more important — and more challenging than ever. Outdoor activities such as soccer games and playground time are off-limits, but you can take the classroom outside.

Try some of these environmental learning projects for both academic and vitamin D enrichment for kids. And because many families include students at different grade levels.

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Get your grow on

While it is not so much the case today, during the first 10,000 years since agriculture developed, most family members had a role in growing food. Use this homebound time to introduce kids of all ages to the art and science of [gardening](#).

Toddlers can poke seeds into the ground (or into a pot on the porch) and pick fruit when it's ripe, while older kids might take over one section of the garden. Grade-schoolers can run plant experiments: Your students can calculate germination rates; conduct seedling races to demonstrate growth under different light or water conditions; dissect plants and flowers to identify their parts; and learn to distinguish the good bugs from the not-so-good ones.

Teens might take over planting plans for the whole garden and calculate harvest times: they

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Cancel climate change

The science of climate change is hard to grasp, but we can teach our kids that human activities such as driving gas-powered cars and using too much electricity make the planet less habitable.

As a family, study the [climate impacts of transportation](#). Print out a map of your neighborhood, then go on a walk. Help small children mark places on the map they can walk to. Point out the cars, power lines and polluting activities you see along the way. Have older kids highlight places on the map where there isn't a sidewalk or a bike lane, then send a copy of the map to an elected official, asking them to put more sidewalks and bike lanes in your neighborhood.

Afterward, make a plan together for incorporating more walking and biking into your family's daily life. and for using public transit once physical distancing is over. If they haven't

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Wonder about water

Even toddlers can grasp the concept of water pollution by performing a [simple activity](#) (conducted outdoors to minimize cleanup, and with weather permitting) to “pollute” and then filter a bucket of water. A similar [water treatment experiment](#) using sedimentation, filtration and disinfection is good for older kids. Making a [rain gauge](#) is a surprisingly satisfying enterprise for kids of all ages, as is [exploring the outdoors on a rainy day](#). Older kids can follow step-by-step instructions to find [plumbing leaks](#) inside and outside of the house. Kids will use investigative skills, perform tests, learn about water use and even do a little math on the way to saving water.

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Discover taxonomic treasures

In "[How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy](#)" (surely a guidebook for these times!), artist Jennie Odell talks about the satisfaction that comes from mentally transforming an undifferentiated mass of greenery into known species. That knowledge gives a sense of both belonging and control, which most of us really need right now. For little kids, just taking a walk and pointing out common flowers or spotting the eagle flying overhead may be enough to make them feel knowledgeable. More goal-oriented tots might appreciate a [scavenger hunt](#) or a game of [bug bingo](#).

Your family can use [iNaturalist](#), a social-media app, to record encounters with other organisms. crowdsource identification and maintain life lists. Older kids can also download

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Become an activist

Even little kids can comprehend the impacts of human activity on the environment when you spot rats and coyotes in the city during daytime or show them pictures of dolphins swimming in Venice's canals. While everyone is at home, take the time to transform information into action.

Students can study endangered habitats and species around the world through artist John Dyer's [Last Chance to Paint](#) project. Then they can submit their own artwork inspired by endangered species for display in the [online World Gallery](#). They can also post the artwork to