

Getting Out More

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

For too many of us, the outdoors is something we experience only on the brief walk between the car and the house. I'll be the first to concur that the outdoors is not always welcoming; mosquitoes, ticks, and greenhead flies lurk in the humid heat that shimmers beyond our climate-controlled capsules. Nevertheless, cutting ourselves off from the natural world is unhealthy than exposing ourselves to the potential dangers that may be found in our own back yards. Therefore the time has come to slap on some sunscreen and bug repellent and unplug the kids from their virtual electronic worlds to discover a far more fascinating place just outside the door.

I sometimes joke about the fact that my wife is a country gal who married a city boy, but that's an oversimplification. Although I was born in New York City, my family soon joined the postwar exodus to the swelling Long Island suburbs. There, housing developments quickly were gobbling up the farmland, but enough remnants of an earlier world survived to offer me a classroom of a different sort from the one I encountered in my elementary school.

Close to our house, on acreage once occupied by a larger farm, lived a family named Swierupski. My sister Lorraine and I became fast friends with their polio-disabled son, Bobby. On summer days we'd help his mother by selling sweet corn and tomatoes in the little farm

stand they maintained along the road. Across the road from the farm stand was a field of about twenty acres that occasionally was planted in potatoes but more often lay fallow, producing weeds and wildflowers. Today a high school occupies the site, but I wonder if any of its classrooms is as rich an educational environment as was that summer-kissed field. Bobby was a keen observer of the natural world. He could identify and tell you something about every butterfly that fluttered there. He was such an excellent teacher that now, more than half a century later, I still can name the butterflies that visit our garden and even tell you how to distinguish the males from the females.

Every field, park, beach, or back yard has the potential to be a classroom. Textbooks, desks, and lab equipment are unnecessary. The only thing you need to bring is curiosity. Take time to become familiar with your surroundings. Be observant. A remarkably small investment will yield rich rewards as you explore the outdoors with your child. At first you may be tempted to swat at every bug or fret about the heat or worry about “getting dirty.” Resist the temptation. Of course, you will want to take precautions with insects that bite or sting (a learning opportunity in itself), remain hydrated and protected from sunburn, and avoid environments such as lawns or gardens that have been treated with pesticides. But watching a bee gather pollen, getting a healthy dose of vitamin D from the sun, or experiencing the delight of springy moss under your bare feet are experiences that never can be enjoyed in front of a computer screen.

“Never question the truth of what you fail to understand,” wrote L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, “the world is full of wonders.” A parent does not need a degree in biology or

physics to introduce a child to the wonders of the natural world. Courage, curiosity, and a small investment of time are sufficient for getting more out of getting out more.

William A. Palmer, Jr., Family and Community Development Coordinator for the Parent–Child Development Corporation, is a willing host to rabbits, box turtles, birds, and butterflies on his three-fourths of an acre in West Point.