



The natural classroom

Your kids can learn a lot while having fun by getting outside.

by Kelly St. John Regier

If you've heard about a medical treatment that could make your child smarter, healthier and happier — without any side effects — would you ask your doctor for a prescription? What if it were as simple as getting your children outside?

That's the message that the Orange County Department of Education's Inside the Outdoors program (insidetheoutdoors.org) wants parents to know. While best known for its weekday programs for school-aged children and summer camps, Inside the Outdoors offers a range of community events for families seeking to get outside and connect with nature.

A large body of research points to the many ways that children benefit when they spend time outside, says Lori Kiesser, development manager for Inside the Outdoors.

"We were built to be outdoors," Kiesser says. "When people are outdoors, particularly kids, you're

healthier, happier and smarter."

For starters, it offers children an opportunity to make a hands-on connection with concepts that may feel abstract in a classroom.

"If you're trying to study the adaptation of a plant from a book, for example, you don't get as much out of it," Kiesser says. "But if you take students outdoors and they feel it, then they understand."

Inside the Outdoors offers family events that are geared for different ages and physical abilities, so toddlers or family members in wheelchairs can participate. These events always have a hands-on component, plus some unstructured time so families can relax and enjoy themselves outside.

For example, on March 8, families can enjoy an astronomy night, which includes an evening hike and a chance to look at the night sky through telescopes. In addition, attendees will hear ancient legends about how the constellations were named.

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Families that want to do more to get their kids outside when they aren't in school have a wealth of resources right here in Orange County, says Kiesser. She adds that many parents don't know just what kind of amazing natural diversity can be found in O.C. parks.

"What we hear from parents all the time is they didn't realize how easy it is to be outdoors in Orange County," she says. "There are waterfalls here. People don't know that. If I were a parent, the best place to start would be the OC Parks website, (ocparks.com)

Kiesser says that another resource for kids is the Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center, located in the Newport Back Bay. The center houses interactive displays to teach children about the Upper Newport Bay estuary. Admission is free. The center also runs family programs open to the community, including outdoor nature walks and storytelling.

The Irvine Ranch Conservancy is a nonprofit organization created to help care for the 50,000 acres of permanently protected lands on the historic Irvine Ranch. Its website (irconservancy.org) furnishes a community calendar of family-friendly outdoor events, including nature hikes, birding walks and volunteer habitat-restoration events. Families should check out the Nature Scene Investigators (NSI) program (getoutdoorsoc.com), created by Inside the Outdoors and students at Sage Hill School. The program provides a clue-guided "mission" for families to




follow in one of 11 parks. An NSI guidebook is available at REI stores (rei.com) – check out the one in Tustin, as well as selected parks and Orange County Public Library locations.

The Children and Nature Network (childrenandnature.org), an organization dedicated to reconnecting children with the outdoors, has a lot of helpful information online, including details about its Nature Club for Families program.

For some reason, children are always fascinated with holes. Kiesser recommends "A Field Guide to Desert Holes," by Pinau Merlin, which helps families identify and guess what might live in the holes they find along the trail.

But parents shouldn't feel they need an organized event to give their children an outdoor education. Kiesser recalls that her fondest learning experiences were the family camping trips she took when she was growing up in Ohio, fishing with her father and exploring the creeks near her home.

Before heading up the trail with their kids, parents should arm themselves with a little bit of knowledge, such as what poison oak looks like. And a magnifying glass will help get a closer look at insects and plants along the way.

A final tip: "Don't forget to take your imagination with you," Kiesser says. 

Books rooted in nature

You and your kids can enjoy the outdoors without leaving your backyard. Try gardening!

- **'Trowel and Error: Over 700 Tips, Remedies and Shortcuts for the Gardener'**
By Sharon Lovejoy
- **'You Grow Girl'**
By Gayla Trail
- **'All New Square Foot Gardening'**
By Mel Bartholomew
- **'101 Self-Sufficiency Gardening Tips'**
By Sheri Ann Richerson