

# **Our Children, Our Planet: Raising Kids Who Can Save the Earth**

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*Parents.com*

September 2013

We all know the bad news: The planet is seriously suffering from all sorts of environmental abuses. Some people remain stuck in denial. And kids, our last best hope for the future, are being hammered by depressing news and the overwhelming scale of environmental problems – even as they are spending less time out in nature.

In the face of all this, can parents, teachers, and others who care about our children do anything? Are there any ways to enlighten as well as empower young people to help protect the air, land, water, and creatures of the Earth?

The answer is Yes.

As a dad, I've learned a lot from my kids – starting with how little I really know. But one of the most important things they've taught me is that raising environmentally aware young people doesn't start with *learning*. No ... it starts with *loving*. Before kids can be expected to understand the facts about our planet, they need to feel an enduring bond with the marvelous places and trees and birds and animals who share that planet with us. We are emotional beings –so we can't ask kids to protect and steward something they don't truly love.

That love comes, first, through a child's experiences in nature. No matter whether that happens in a patch of grass at a city park or somewhere in deeper wilderness – it's a time of magic.

All kids need is a chance to play in soil or sand or a pile of leaves. To explore a quiet glade (with no electronics to intrude). To discover a mossy stream or a pair of baby raccoons or a piece of petrified wood that's a million times older than the child herself. My family, for more than twenty years, has watched butterflies emerge from their cocoons each summer – a thrilling experience for everyone.

All these are teachable moments, offering opportunities to learn more about connectedness, natural patterns, transformation, evolution, water sources, or geologic time. But most of all ... they are opportunities to wonder, discover, and love.

When that emotional bond is secure, then it's time to explain the serious environmental challenges we face – with honesty but also a light touch. The goal is to impart understanding, not despair. So talk about the links between the purity of water, the health of frogs, and the survival of humankind. Discuss the essential wisdom of not fouling our nest, preserving the complex web of natural systems that support us all. Finally, look at some photos of the Earth from space – and then consider how

unique and precious our lonely planet really is. Add all that together, along with nature's unending ability to delight and surprise ... and you'll have kids who are truly motivated to help save the Earth.

Now comes the hardest part – maintaining hope. In our troubled times, this is difficult for any caring adult. But it's even more difficult for young people, who haven't seen as many winters followed by springtime. The best way to keep kids' hope alive, I believe, is to convey the idea that every person matters. That every human being – even a child – has the power to make choices that can cumulatively make a difference.

How to do that? Certainly not through lectures or sermons! Instead, just share stories. Whether true tales of remarkable people or fictional tales of unlikely heroes – such stories are lifelines that keep us afloat. They connect us to people who have faced enormous challenges and found the courage to persevere – and sometimes, to triumph.

Hope often eludes us, especially in a world that is sometimes darkened by the clouds of despair. But hope is resilient, like a wildflower in the harshest mountain storm. It can survive, and maybe even flower beautifully.

And if hope survives ... so will we.