



# Growing Up WILD

## A WILD Start

It is with great pleasure that we share this exciting nature-based early childhood program from the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies and Project WILD called "Growing Up WILD."

Growing Up WILD is the culmination of many years of thoughtful and deliberate initiatives by enthusiastic Project WILD State Coordinators to make Project WILD available to the many early childhood educators who wished to incorporate nature-based learning into their classroom and childcare settings.

At its very beginning, Growing Up WILD was a wide-ranging assortment of Project WILD activity

adaptations produced by Project WILD State Coordinators to address growing participation by early childhood educators in Project WILD training workshops. A number of states embarked on dedicated Project WILD early childhood programs that served to build momentum and support to produce a national early childhood activity guide and associated training program.

The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies extends special appreciation to state Project WILD programs in Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, and Utah for producing early written materials that applied the Project WILD philosophy to educate even younger learners about wildlife and the environment.

In subsequent years, Idaho Fish and Game produced a colorful "WILD about Early Learners" guide and offered inspiring training at the

2006 gathering of Project WILD Coordinators. This provided the impetus for the creation of a national program that could be utilized by all states to connect young learners to nature—we call this "Growing Up WILD."

With so many early supporters in state Project WILD offices, there was no shortage of creative and meaningful activity ideas which were developed into written activities, tested with children, illustrated and edited, then incorporated into this publication. All the while, the Project WILD Coordinators' Early Childhood Committee provided important and much appreciated

review and input during program development. The Texas Head Start State Collaborative Office provided welcome encouragement and much enthusiasm for our efforts.

With this new cornerstone program for Project WILD, we are building on young children's sense of wonder about nature as we invite them to explore wildlife and the world around them at a very early age.

To make this happen, we need the dedicated efforts of committed educators and leaders like you to take that first step outside, with kids in tow, to explore the wonderful world of plant and animal communities—big places and small places, rural and urban, the outdoors offers a wonderful assortment of learning opportunities and a welcome place to play.

Yours outside—with the children!

*Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies  
and Project WILD*

**If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.**

**Rachel Carson**



## Connecting Children to Nature

A young child's connection with nature can be as simple as sitting under a tree, listening to the chirping of crickets, or planting a bean seed. Spending time in nature has many positive benefits. Children who have opportunities to play and learn in nature are more likely to:

- ✿ Handle challenges and problems more capably.
- ✿ Act responsibly toward the earth and each other.
- ✿ Be more physically active and aware of nutrition, and less likely to be obese.
- ✿ Have a greater appreciation of the arts, music, history, and literature.
- ✿ Choose science or a related field for careers.
- ✿ Become better-informed and environmentally-aware adults.

Growing Up WILD helps connect children to the outdoors in a number of ways:

- ✿ Several of the 27 activities involve children directly exploring nature outdoors.
- ✿ All of the activities include a **Take Me Outside** section that offers specific suggestions for getting children active outdoors, with nature walks, physical games, and other activities.
- ✿ Many of the activities' **Centers & Extensions** and **Home Connections** sections include ideas for furthering children's exploration outdoors.

Growing Up WILD is well aligned with efforts by several state and local governments to help provide children with access to the outdoors in order to ensure children's healthy development and learning. An example of a state's "Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights" proclamation can be found on page 64.



## Developmentally Appropriate Practice

A growing body of research indicates that young children learn in ways that are markedly different from older children and adults. Children in the early childhood years learn primarily through their senses and from direct experience. They develop an understanding about the world through play, exploration, and creative activities, and by watching and imitating adults and other children.

As they mature, young children undergo changes in all aspects of their development, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive (or intellectual). These changes occur in relatively predictable sequences or stages that generally lead to more complexity in things like language, social interactions, physical agility, and problem solving. Children move through these developmental stages at an individual rate depending on their age and maturity, but also based on their experiences and the social context of these experiences.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), early childhood educators can promote a child's optimal development and learning through developmentally appropriate practice, which includes:

✿ Meeting children where they are and enabling them to work toward goals that are both challenging and achievable.

- ✿ Teaching in ways that are appropriate to children's maturity and developmental status, are attuned to children as unique individuals, and are responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.
- ✿ Planning programs based on knowledge—not assumptions—of how children learn and develop.
- ✿ Recognizing that a teacher's moment-to-moment actions and interactions with children are the most powerful determinant of learning outcomes and development.
- ✿ Providing child-guided and teacher-guided experiences, as both are vital to children's development and learning.
- ✿ Recognizing play as important for promoting key abilities that enable children to learn.
- ✿ Intentionally using a variety of approaches and strategies to support children's interest and ability in each learning domain.

(Source: "Key Messages of the Position Statement," Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Edition.)

Growing Up WILD promotes and supports developmentally appropriate practice in a number of ways. Each activity presents a wide range of options so that children can work and learn at developmental levels that are individually appropriate. The guide also uses a variety of teaching strategies—small group, whole group, centers, individual and pair work, and teachable moments—that allow the teacher to choose those appropriate for each child and situation.





Growing Up WILD activities as a whole include both child-initiated and teacher-initiated learning experiences, giving children opportunities to select among rich choices prepared by the teacher. Educators have the flexibility to modify activities to meet the needs of children's different age levels and developmental stages. Activities also include opportunities for learning through play, particularly in the **Take Me Outside** and **Centers & Extensions** components.

Finally, all the activities interweave content areas—literacy, math, science, and the arts—and involve social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive domains, helping to foster development and learning in all areas. (See page 8 for a description of the various activity components.)

## Nature Play

Children love to play, and can easily turn a twig into a toy or a mud puddle into a play area. But play is more than just fun and games—it is vitally important for children's healthy development. In addition to promoting physical well-being, play provides the foundation for learning and academic success, is critical for the development of creative problem-solving and imagination, and helps children learn how to interact with others. Play integrates all types of learning, including physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.

The Alliance for Childhood defines play as a set of behaviors that are freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated. Children can play anywhere and with anything, but the natural world is an especially inviting place for play. It beckons children to invent, explore, and try different things. Open-ended play in natural settings or with natural objects enhances curiosity and triggers the imagination.

Many of the *Growing Up WILD* activities invite open-ended nature play, and specific suggestions can be found in the **Take Me Outside** and **Centers & Extensions** sections. In addition, educators and caregivers may promote nature play with children by:

- ✿ Reserving time every day for outdoor play when children can run, explore, climb, find secret hiding places, dream up stories, and have outdoor adventures.

- ✿ Allowing children the opportunity to play in various outdoor spaces, as different settings will inspire different kinds of play. For example, a brush pile may invite investigation, while a grassy field may encourage make-believe games.



- ✿ Providing or allowing children to use natural materials like sticks, mud, water, and rocks as the raw materials for their play.

- ✿ Allowing children to play outside in a variety of weather conditions, as long as the weather is not threatening. Experiencing the smells and sounds of rain is joyful to children, and they may see insects, birds, or other animals behaving differently than on a typical day.

## Nature in the Classroom

Whether attracted to the beauty of a pebble, the texture of moss or the symmetry of a leaf, children are drawn to explore and collect items they find in nature. Consider designating space in the classroom, such as a "Nature Nook," at which collections of natural objects are made available to children. Encourage children to offer their own contributions—such as rocks, leaves, acorns, pine cones, seed pods, flowers, twigs, and tree bark. You may want to supplement collections through purchased items—including feathers from craft stores, plastic models of animal skulls, animal puppets, animal flash cards, bug boxes, and field guides (see the **Resources** section). Set out magnifiers, scales, rulers, containers, paper, and writing supplies. Model to children how the collections can be safely explored through our senses, various ways items can be organized, and how observations can be recorded and shared among the class.

Support children's initiatives to incorporate items from nature into their play and artwork. Children may want to supplement wooden building blocks with pieces of tree bark or sticks. Near windows, set out pillows, rugs, potted plants, and children's binoculars to take advantage of natural sunlight and opportunities to observe wildlife. Create a simple table-top terrarium by collecting soil and plants in a plastic food container. Also consider keeping a class pet to help children develop respect for animals and learn about habitat needs.



## Math Connections

Math is more than numbers. It is a complex subject that centers on the concepts of quantity, shapes, patterns, measurement, and change.

Research suggests that people are "predisposed" to learn simple math as young as infancy. Early math concepts include recognizing shapes and sizes, counting verbally, and identifying quantities. Educators and parents can help build on this natural predisposition through instruction, games, and hands-on activities to give young children a strong foundation for future math learning.

Each *Growing Up WILD* activity includes a **Mighty Math** section with suggestions for incorporating math. These suggestions connect math to nature and everyday life and give young children practice using math vocabulary. Collectively, they encourage children to sort, compare, and classify objects; display data with graphs and pictures; identify shapes; and make measurements.



## Language and Literacy Connections

Although children may not become full-blown readers until well into elementary school, they begin the process of learning to read as newborns. Early experiences like being read to aloud, exploring books, and playing with words and letters help young children develop the rich vocabulary and broad knowledge base they will need to become readers and writers. These activities help children hear and manipulate sounds, name and recognize letters, and deepen listening and speaking abilities.

*Growing Up WILD* promotes early literacy experiences in a number of ways:

- ✿ Each *Growing Up WILD* activity lists read-aloud fiction and non-fiction book recommendations in the **Resources** section.
- ✿ The **Music & Movement** section of most activities features rhyming songs, poems, and finger plays that promote awareness of the sounds and structure of language.
- ✿ **Student Resource Pages** have both pictures and simple word labels.



- ✿ The **Centers & Extensions** section of many activities suggests specific ideas for reading centers.
- ✿ Many activities incorporate the use of a Nature Notebook for children to record in words or pictures the observations and discoveries they make. The notebook itself can be a small spiral-bound notebook, several pieces of paper stapled together, or a ring binder.
- ✿ Many activities encourage children's verbal descriptions and conversations about their experiences and learning about nature.



## Healthy Kids

Recent trends in the health of U.S. children are extremely alarming. Since the 1960s, childhood obesity has increased five-fold—with devastating short- and long-term consequences, including a greater likelihood to develop type 2 diabetes and a greater risk for heart disease. In recent years, there has also been a sharp increase in cavities in children—especially in those younger and poorer—a sign of overall declining dental health.

Many factors have contributed to these trends, including diet and reduced activity level of children. As these trends now affect younger and younger children, it is vital that early childhood settings help promote a healthy lifestyle for children. Whenever possible, children should be encouraged to be active, eat healthfully, and understand and make healthful choices.

Every *Growing Up WILD* activity contains the following components to promote healthful practices in early childhood settings:

- ✿ **Healthy Me!**—suggests ways to encourage healthy habits in children and involves topics such as physical exercise, nutrition, personal hygiene, or safety.
- ✿ **Snack**—offers ideas for a healthful snack related to the activity theme; these use fruits, vegetables, and whole grains whenever possible.
- ✿ **Take Me Outside**—provides suggestions for taking the learning outside, and often involves physical activities such as running games and nature hikes.
- ✿ **Music & Movement**—includes dance, role play, and other physical movement activities.