family nature clubs
zoos and aquariums
connecting families to nature
& you
“Accredited zoos and aquariums are where nature play begins for many families, particularly in our increasingly urban world. As conservation organizations, part of our mission is to create experiences that cultivate environmental stewards and foster a connection to wildlife and nature. We hope these resources make it easier for more aquariums and zoos to become leaders in their communities for the nature play movement.”

— Jackie Ogden, Ph.D., Vice President, Animals, Science and Environment, Walt Disney Parks and Resorts
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Introduction

Leaders of Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) have long realized that engaging families is vital to the long-term success of conserving nature. They also know they can play a key role in creating a passion for nature and inspiring conservation action among children and families. With unparalleled reach and public trust, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are natural hubs for connecting guests to nature. They are uniquely poised to promote both structured and unstructured nature play for families through nature-based programming and the formation of Family Nature Clubs. These clubs may take slightly different forms, but they all offer accessible, easy, low- (or no-) cost fun through family-oriented nature-based outdoor activities that can help build a life-long affiliation with zoos and aquariums, and with nature itself. Family Nature Clubs are natural allies in support of the mission of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums.

“About 1 in 10 of the world’s population will visit a zoo this year. What other conservation organization has this kind of opportunity? Our society has been drifting away from nature, but many long to stop the tide before it is too late, a phenomenon best represented in the movement to reconnect children to nature, spurred on by Richard Louv’s Last Child in the Woods (2005). Can zoos [and aquariums] help avert this crisis? For zoos [and aquariums] to succeed in this endeavor, they must inspire people to get out into nature, not just return to the zoo. Zoos [and aquariums], if they do it right, can connect people to the nature beyond their fences.”

The purpose of this toolkit, *Family Nature Clubs & You*, is to provide information, resources, best practices and even inspiration for zoos and aquariums that are interested in creating or supporting a Family Nature Club. This toolkit was developed by drawing on the ideas and experiences of numerous experts in the field, including many AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums that implement family-based nature programming. The toolkit provides examples of ways to organize and host events both on and off zoo and aquarium grounds, as well as ideas for collaborating with and supporting existing Family Nature Clubs. We also encourage the development of your own ideas for incorporating unstructured nature play and Family Nature Clubs in your programming. We want to hear from you!

**PURPOSE OF THE TOOLKIT**

Value of Nature Play

Why do we call it “The Great Outdoors”? There are vast and virtually endless opportunities to see, explore, learn from and be inspired by the wonders of our natural world. Nature is more than plants, animals, air, earth and water; it is an important part of who we are as humans. Research strongly indicates that spending time in nature benefits physical and mental health and our overall well-being. It is especially important for children to have frequent and varied opportunities for play outdoors in nature as a healthy and fun part of their everyday lives. Unstructured nature play is spontaneous and self-directed. It allows children to become self-reliant, make independent observations and decisions, explore interests, solve problems, discover talents and form their individual identities. Children who play in nature tend to be happier and are better prepared for the experiences of adulthood. They are more self-disciplined and focused. They are more self-confident, creative and cooperative. They are better problem-solvers, more optimistic and more physically fit. Nature play strengthens family ties, promotes a sense of community and space and instills a conservation mindset and caring attitude towards the environment. But what if “The Great Outdoors” seems too great, too vast, or too far away? Where does someone go to experience nature when he or she does not know where to start?
Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium

An opportunity for family bonding, learning and fun begins with every trip to an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium. A trip to the zoo or the aquarium also represents a nature experience for many families. It is a means of connecting with animals and the natural world while in a familiar and safe environment. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are gateways through which millions of people learn about and value the rich diversity of life that is humankind’s wildlife heritage. As trusted community entities, accredited zoos and aquariums are in the unique position to enable nature play experiences and foster a conservation ethic that begins through a child’s self-led discovery and is reinforced by shared experiences as a family. Children and adults alike enjoy fun opportunities to learn about animals and their environments. Everyone delights in the special moments where animals themselves are observed playing!

Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium is a ground-breaking collaboration between AZA and The Walt Disney Company that invites accredited zoos and aquariums and their community partners to join the worldwide movement to connect families to nature.

It calls for institutions to extend or create family-centered, nature-based programs both on and off site. Promoting nature play programming, as well as forming and supporting Family Nature Clubs, offers an exceptional way to engage people, instill conservation values, connect with the community, and ultimately take actions towards saving species and their habitats.

Motivation to protect and conserve wildlife and wild places is founded on a love and understanding of nature, which in many cases starts at an accredited zoo or aquarium. The influence of direct experiences in nature during childhood, particularly when the child is in the company of a caring adult, can have far-reaching impacts on positive adult behavior and inspire a conservation ethic. More and more, activities for children are structured, adult-guided and/or technology-driven, leaving few opportunities for children to engage in unstructured nature play. More traditionally structured environmental education programs serve an important role in cultivating an environmental ethic, but direct experience with nature and opportunities for unstructured play in nature are at the heart of most environmental action in adulthood.
“The collective ability of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums to reach literally millions of families around the world is unmatched. As trusted institutions they can help infuse their communities with a sense of place, a pride in local natural history, and directly foster the next generation of environmental stewards. The relationships zoos and aquariums build with their communities can increase the possibility that future generations will grow up in a nature-rich world.”

Many children today are bombarded with structured activities and an overabundance of technology, even at very young ages. School-aged children often face a school day that has limited recess and sometimes no physical activity. Kids are under pressure to perform and achieve like never before, spending an average of less than 10 minutes in unstructured play outdoors each day and an average of more than 50 hours weekly plugged into media.

People are talking more about the benefits of and need for children’s unstructured nature play, including experts ranging from scientists to parents themselves. Research indicates that nature play promotes health benefits, including cognitive, social and emotional development, and that it builds resilience and creativity as well. Research also indicates that experiences in nature as a child lead to environmental awareness and stewardship later in life, which are among the core values of many zoos and aquariums.

What is Nature Play?

Nature play can take a variety of forms, from more structured learning activities to true unstructured nature play, and all are important to a child’s overall development. Family Nature Clubs afford the critical opportunity to offer a safe haven for unstructured nature play. Unstructured nature play is child-directed and allows for spontaneous learning. As children grow and mature, adults become less and less involved in the actual play and move more to the periphery to simply observe and only intervene when safety is a factor. A key element is to allow time at each activity for children to be free to explore, climb, spin and jump, reflect, observe, and even be quiet in appropriate places.

- See pages 18 to 21 for examples of activities that bridge structured and unstructured nature play
- See pages 22 and 23 for information on developmental characteristics
Family Nature Clubs

Family Nature Clubs are a great way for zoos and aquariums to expand their role in connecting people to nature. They offer programs that enhance the health and well-being of families and build community in the natural areas both in and surrounding the institution. A Family Nature Club is made up of a group of people with a shared interest in connecting children and families to nature and who do so on a regular basis. Zoos and aquariums are well-positioned to create and support Family Nature Clubs in communities as they provide a safe environment and starting point for many families who want to explore nature. And the good news is that creating Family Nature Clubs at a zoo or aquarium can be a simple endeavor. Just follow the steps outlined here and let your imagination run wild.

SOME KEY BENEFITS

FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, FAMILY NATURE CLUBS:
• are inclusive of all types of families — single parents, extended families, mentors, and friends that feel like family
• foster a regular connection with the natural world
• help families address the most common barriers to getting out in nature — fears, logistics, and lack of information
• increase a sense of community
• help make children happier, healthier, smarter, and more creative
• facilitate family and social bonding — nature brings families together and fosters friendships across racial, political, religious beliefs and other divides

FOR ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS, FAMILY NATURE CLUBS:
• can be created at any zoo or aquarium
• foster relationships and personal connections with guests
• demonstrate added value to the surrounding community
• have a positive effect on public relations and community engagement
• cultivate the next generation of environmental champions
• offer exceptional return on mission
GETTING STARTED: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OPTIONS

Starting a Family Nature Club is easier than you might think. This guide is designed to help you get organized and put the pieces in place to ensure that your program is a success. The first step is to decide how you want to structure your Family Nature Club. Here are a few proven models — see which one is right for your zoo or aquarium.
**Partner with an existing Family Nature Club**

Many communities already have an established network of active Family Nature Clubs. If there is a Family Nature Club near your zoo or aquarium, the easiest way to start may be to contact the leaders of the club and invite them to collaborate with your institution. A directory of clubs listed with the Children & Nature Network (C&NN) can be found at [www.childrenandnature.org/directory/clubs](http://www.childrenandnature.org/directory/clubs). You could offer to host activities, both on and off zoo or aquarium grounds, as well as cross-promote activities to your membership base. Contact the director of the Natural Families Network at the Children & Nature Network for more information, or for an introduction to a club leader near you.

**Collaborate with an existing or new community partner**

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums value strong community partnerships. It is likely that you know of or will find other organizations in your community with similar missions. Sharing the responsibility and time commitment of starting a club with a partner or like-minded organization can make the endeavor more enjoyable and strengthen community relations, making it easier for both organizations to serve children and families in nature. There’s also the added benefit of cross-promotion and gaining new membership. Plus, a community-based organization may facilitate the off grounds experiences for the club.

**Start a Family Nature Club at your zoo or aquarium**

Many zoos and aquariums have started their own Family Nature Clubs. The advantage to this model is that your zoo or aquarium can brand Family Nature Club activities both on and off grounds and include a connection with other programs offered by your institution. Activities can be both staff or volunteer led, depending on your goals. See the “Quick Start Guide” on page 12 to get your Family Nature Club going today.
QUICK START GUIDE

Most Family Nature Club leaders dedicate about 8 hours to get their initial plans in place, then roughly 2 hours a month on planning, marketing, and general organizational responsibilities per activity. The following steps will help get a plan in place whether club activities are hosted on or off zoo or aquarium grounds.

1. Plan and organize
Choose your organizational structure and what makes sense for your institution. For example, meetup.com has built-in tools for scheduling events, notifying members, and managing responses. Be clear about who will be responsible for which tasks. Decide how often you will meet, and how much time will be involved in each adventure. Most club outings range from 1 to 3 hours in length. Plan and organize 6 months’ worth of activities (or more!) to get started if you can. It will pay off to have the legwork done as you’re embarking on this adventure.

2. Notify and advocate
From management and supervisors to colleagues and volunteers, getting people to support your institution’s Family Nature Club will be the key to its success. Other departments to get buy in from include marketing and communications or public relations and the legal or risk management departments. Read up and share research on the need for, and the importance of, connecting children and families to nature. Visit www.childrenandnature.org/documents for more information and research compiled by the Children & Nature Network.

3. Develop a marketing plan
Be sure to target the family audience in your marketing, and don’t forget to include extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. Utilize your organization’s regular avenues of communication, such as newsletters, emails and websites, to announce your club’s activities. Targeted invitations and collaborations with existing community partners afford a great opportunity to recruit participants and cross-promote efforts and missions.

See page 24 for Tools, Templates and More

See page 16 for more ideas on “Spreading the Word”
4. Know your places and spaces
It is a good idea to scope out suitable locations on grounds and off grounds near your institution. Be sure off-site locations have ample parking, are child-friendly and, as often as possible, have space for kids to run, jump, and play. Determine what rules and regulations are in place for nature play, and be prepared to communicate them with your participants. Finally, note any special features for each destination, including details on where to meet, applicable fees, and what to do once there.
• See page 24 for “Places and Spaces” Checklist

5. Make it easy
Informed and prepared participants are happy participants! Your workload will also be simplified by giving members consistent information about what to expect and what to bring on each adventure for hassle-free outings. The list should include items such as water, snacks, and sun protection. Share any basic rules or expectations for when the group meets, from how long they can expect to spend at an area to ensuring that each participant feels comfortable, valued and respected.
• See page 24 for a “Hassle-free Outings Participant Checklist”

6. Let the adventures begin!
Start your adventures on time with a 15-minute grace period for late arrivals. Welcome each participant and thank them for their time and commitment to connecting their children to nature. During the group welcome, emphasize the value of following their children’s lead and fostering a sense of wonder and awe.
• See page 24 for a “Flow of Events Advisor”

7. Facilitate nature play and stay flexible
Knowing what to do and how to experience a natural area or nature play space may not be intuitive to every participant. A brief introduction to what can be seen, heard, and experienced can provide a gateway. Share a few safety tips and check in with parenting adults as needed about their reservations to promote an enjoyable experience for all. Take care not to overshadow individual experience and discovery; a five to ten minute overview or activity is often all that is needed to increase comfort levels and kickstart a memorable experience. Above all else, pay attention to the dynamics of the group and of the individual families. Their experiences should remain the focus, with other information and messaging as a supplement.
• See pages 18 to 21 for examples of activities that bridge structured and unstructured nature play
Finding a space
Accredited zoos and aquariums are uniquely poised to foster a connection to the natural world, starting at the “safe haven” of their own grounds. A nature play space is a purposefully designed or designated area that integrates natural components for structured and/or unstructured play and learning. While Family Nature Clubs would surely utilize such an area on zoo or aquarium grounds, having a nature play exhibit is certainly not a requirement to have a club. Other areas within the zoo or aquarium grounds can lend themselves to the types of interactions that are more open-ended and child-directed. Think about touch tanks and children’s zoos, native gardens and un-manicured areas. Also consider where you might host your club off grounds in your community, utilizing natural areas that allow for children to play and explore. Wherever the club meets, family-based nature programming and Family Nature Clubs provide a great opportunity to share information with caregivers. Celebrate the importance and value of nature play. Utilize the time during activities to connect with the adults, fostering their sense of understanding and ability to mentor their own children in nature.

• See pages 18 to 21 for examples of activities that bridge structured and unstructured nature play.
In the Spotlight: Party for the Planet™

Party for the Planet™ is AZA’s signature Earth Day event and the largest combined Earth Day celebration in North America. Every year, more than 100 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums across the country celebrate Party for the Planet™ on or around Earth Day (April 22) with activities, giveaways and special events designed for kids of all ages. Party for the Planet™ provides a fantastic venue to commence, celebrate, or simply show off family-based nature play programming and your Family Nature Club.

CASE STUDY 1 | Memphis Zoo

“This year, we participated in Party for the Planet™ by doing a couple of different things. Perhaps our biggest endeavor was Trees for Wildlife. As part of a program called Trees for Wildlife from the National Wildlife Federation, the Zoo was granted 200 trees. Of those, 100 trees were planted on Zoo grounds in the ‘Polar Bear Forest’ and the rest were given away to visitors who were encouraged to plant the tree as a way to reduce their carbon footprint.”

— Laura Doty, Memphis Zoo.

In the Spotlight: World Oceans Day

Since 2002, The Ocean Project and the World Ocean Network have helped to promote and coordinate World Oceans Day events worldwide with aquariums, zoos, and a variety of other organizations. With official UN designation, each year an increasing number of countries and organizations have been marking June 8 as an opportunity to celebrate world oceans and our personal connection to the sea. Like Party for the Planet™, World Oceans Day events are ideal for highlighting the mission of aquariums and zoos to connect children and families to nature through nature play programming and Family Nature Clubs.

CASE STUDY 2 | National Aquarium

“As part of this year’s World Oceans Day celebration, the National Aquarium partnered with the Maryland Institute College of Art to produce a community art project! Our events team worked with a local art student to build a large sculpture of our beloved three-finned sea turtle, Calypso. With help from the public, the artist filled the sculpture with recycled plastic bags. This community art project was later exhibited at Baltimore’s nationally-recognized Arts festival, Artscape!”

— Nabila Chami, National Aquarium
Spreading the word
Developing and utilizing a good marketing plan will be key to the success of your Family Nature Club. Start by targeting your existing network of family members, and build from there. Encourage your members to invite their non-member friends and families too. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have the advantage of strong visibility in the community, due in part to relevant, targeted marketing. Working in conjunction with your marketing/public relations department, plan to utilize the communication systems that are already in place at your facility to announce and grow your Family Nature Club. Newsletters and e-blasts work well for targeting the family audience. Ideally, the club should have some visibility on your institution’s homepage with a link to its own page. When working with community partners, be open to the idea of cross-promotion to members.

Starting a group on sites such as meetup.com is also highly recommended as a means of reaching an extended audience for your Family Nature Club. By selecting strategic keywords for your group, meetup.com will actually recommend your Family Nature Club to everyone who has selected those same keywords. Include words such as “animals” and “petting zoo” or “tidepooling,” but also list words that highlight some of your more specialized experiences for your club, such as “hiking with kids,” “nature,” “playgroup,” “stay at home moms” and “family nature club,” to name a few. These keywords will have the added bonus of attracting potential new members, both for your club and for your zoo or aquarium!

Continuity and sustainability
One of the most sustainable practices in maintaining Family Nature Clubs is to identify an adult volunteer from the community, such as a parent or grandparent, who participates in the club, is willing to work closely with you, and who, over time, may take over the main responsibilities of planning, posting events, and answering member questions. This person may be an established volunteer at your zoo or aquarium who has young children or grandchildren. It may be someone who works part-time for your camp programs and has already demonstrated talent with facilitating learning experiences for children. If you foster the right relationships, the responsibility of managing a Family Nature Club at your zoo or aquarium does not necessarily need to fall on full-time education staff.
Q & A

Q Our aquarium has limited outdoor space. What can I do?
A If your zoo or aquarium has limited physical space or open areas for unstructured nature play, one option is to investigate nearby locations that have outdoor space. An aquarium- or zoo-based Family Nature Club should meet off grounds whenever possible, so don’t let a lack of space on grounds stop you from starting up a club. Consider other organizations with venues that lend themselves to unstructured nature play and exploration for participating families.

Q What can I do about liability?
A Liability is a concern for many Family Nature Club leaders, particularly when associated with a specific institution. Review your concerns and issues with your organization’s liability or risk-management department to check for coverage. Most family-organized clubs include a release of liability and photo waiver on each sign-in sheet for events. We provide one example to download on page 24.

Risk taking often comes up when talking about playing in nature, climbing trees and rocks, etc. Of course there is risk taking — that’s one of the benefits! Just as in organized sports and on structured playgrounds, accidents may happen. Knees may be skinned and there could be bumps and bruises. But the upside is that kids learn to take appropriate risks and learn to make judgments for themselves. They learn and develop their own capabilities as their experience and time in nature grows.

Q I consider myself to be an environmental educator. Why should I spend my time just letting kids play?
A Facilitating learning through nature play is indeed a shift from the traditional methods of environmental education. There is growing evidence that correlates play with learning. Research shows that kids need this type of play for healthy development — socially, emotionally and academically. Unstructured play fosters brain development in important ways, allowing children to explore how the world works, solve problems, and negotiate with peers. Furthermore, those who experience unstructured outdoor play in their youth are more likely to become environmental stewards as adults, which achieves a primary outcome of environmental education. This is enhanced even more when the child is coupled with a caring adult!
Activities that Bridge Structured and Unstructured Nature Play

The following pages list examples of more structured activities that can be particularly effective at bridging from structured to unstructured nature play. Most of these can be easily adapted for use on or off zoo or aquarium grounds and though they are structured, most incorporate an element of playfulness that can be modified for a variety of age levels. Try out the following activities to help families get started, but don’t be surprised if the best fun happens when you’re not even trying!

- See pages 22 to 23 for information on developmental characteristics
Climb It. Keep a lookout for nature’s jungle gyms — trees, fallen logs, big boulders, and more. With little or no assistance from adults (depending on age and development), kids can scale these “structures” and gain agility, balance, and confidence in the process.

Color Match. Pick up some paint samples from a local hardware store and give one to each of your participants. See if they can match the colors on their samples with those they see around them. This can be a general color match for younger kids, to an exact match for your older adventurers.

Sound It Out. Encourage your group to be silent for a one-minute stretch of the outing. Count sounds on your fingers as you stay in place. Can you guess what made which sound? Repeat this activity in different places around your grounds or on your hike. How do the sounds compare by location and time of day?

Cloud Watch. Capitalize on a cloudy day to gaze and imagine. As you know, clouds come in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors, lending themselves well to a child’s (and adult’s) imagination.

Trace Shadows. Look for the shadows of trees, shrubs, or even tall flowers falling across a stretch of sidewalk or asphalt. Use chalk to outline their shapes. Or, better yet, lay a piece of paper on the ground and use pencil or paint to sketch the shadows. If possible, return to the same place some time later to observe changes in the shadows.

Nature Bracelets. Make a bracelet around the kids’ wrists using thick masking tape, sticky side out. As the kids hike, have them pick up leaves, flower petals, and other natural objects that have fallen to the ground, and stick them on their bracelet. Elicit the help of another adult or two to make the bracelets and put them on each child.

Get Crafty. Give children an opportunity to draw, sculpt, and create. Use materials found in nature or basic craft supplies to design an animal, plant, or nature scene. Encourage imagination and exploration: build a house for a toad or crab, design your own island, create footprints and animal tracks in the mud or sand, and pretend play.

Journal. Participants are nature’s explorers. Give them the freedom to jot down notes and ideas about sights, sounds, feelings, and experiences, sketch trees, and write poems. Older participants can be challenged to make specific observations.

Scavenger Hunt. Before you set out on a hike, make a list of a dozen or so items that might be seen along the way. List specific objects, such as a feather, a big boulder, or a tree with needles, or use descriptive phrases, such as “something yellow,” “a place where insects live,” or “something that’s rotting.” As you hike, kids can check off the items they find.

Snow or Sand Angels. Making snow angels is a classic pastime and fun for everyone. Invite participants to find a clear patch of snow (or sand) big enough to lie down on. Then explain how to make an angel: extend arms out to just above shoulder height and move them down to waist, while doing jumping jack motions with legs. Carefully get up and see your “angel.”
Forts and Fairy Houses. Invite participants to make their own forts or miniature fairy and gnome houses using the natural materials found near your location. Even the most simple structure can provide endless fun and use of the imagination.

Practice Wildlife Watching. Ask club participants what they think it takes to be a good wildlife watcher. Then head out to a favorite exhibit, or off grounds to a marsh, beach, field, forest, or other natural area and see if they can sit quietly long enough to see some interesting animal activity. Even a silent five minutes observing squirrels might prove fascinating.

Animal Charades. Take wildlife watching to the next level by having a few club participants pretend to be an animal. Suggest mimicking behaviors such as leaping, crawling, climbing trees, digging in dirt, climbing across logs and splashing in the water and ask others to guess the animal. Or just suggest acting out an animal and let the group go wild.

Petting Zoo or Touch Tank. Consider hosting a regularly scheduled play session at the petting zoo, tide pool touch tank, or other children’s area at your facility. Be ready to greet participants and talk about the importance of play and following the child’s lead, even
at these areas. Adults, including parents, can tend to rush children along and inadvertently curb their sense of wonder and awe. Resist the temptation to guide and direct the children to certain animals or areas, unless animal or child safety is a concern. Instead, model how to follow the child’s curiosity and see where it leads.

**Loose Parts Nature Play Area.** In this activity, children are invited to engage in unstructured outdoor play with a collection of natural materials, such as tree cookies, pinecones, bamboo sticks, branches, shells, etc. Loose Parts Nature Play can be done almost anywhere—a garden setting, an open field, a lawn, or an asphalt lot. Just make sure there is enough clear space to build small structures and play in them. Arrange materials in an inviting way in the open space and convey these simple rules for participation:
1. Children guide the experience.
2. No throwing or weapon use with materials.
3. When you’re done building and leave the area, someone else can add to or take away from your construction.
4. Have fun and use your imagination!
DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

Note that these lists indicate average development and give a general idea of what to expect. Children develop at uneven rates and their caregivers know them best. Also remember that each child is a unique individual. For information on infant development, please visit www.seek.state.mn.us/publications/naturalwonders.pdf.

Toddler and Preschool Aged Children
(2 to 4 year olds)
• Are proficient at most simple large muscle skills
• Are developing improved hand coordination
• Engage in physical testing with confidence — jumping from heights, climbing, hanging by arms, rolling, spinning, etc.
• Like to throw and retrieve objects
• Are very curious
• Are interested in nature, science, animals, and how things work
• Have short attention spans
• Have a strong desire for independence
• Begin to be purposeful and goal-directed by around age 4

What to Consider
• Limit activities to 5 to 15 minutes
• Include time for running, jumping and climbing
• Consider rhythmic activities, songs and dramatics
• Include games or activities that invite children to imitate animals, like “Animal Charades”

Kindergarten through Third Graders
(5 to 8 year olds)
• Show slow but steady growth
• Demonstrate good large motor control
• Show inconsistent levels of maturity
• Can be eager, self-assertive, aggressive and competitive
• Are becoming independent and, given time, can do things for themselves
• Are learning to relate to people outside of their families
• Are learning concepts of right versus wrong
• Show an increasing attention span

What to Consider
• Limit activities to 15 to 20 minutes
• Include time for running, jumping and climbing
• Consider rhythmic activities, songs and dramatics
• Include concrete learning and active participation
• Teach and model how to share and work cooperatively in groups
• Give time to develop skills and abilities
• Include observation and journaling during activities, such as drawing the animals they see
Fourth through Sixth Graders
(9 to 11 year olds)
• Show steady growth, including growth spurts (girls about two years ahead of boys)
• Demonstrate energy, eagerness and enthusiasm
• Are often restless and fidgety
• Show fluctuating interest levels, from highly interested and curious to bored
• Can be noisy and argumentative
• Are often highly imaginative and affectionate
• Are continuing to learn about moral judgements and right versus wrong
• Are self-conscious, afraid to fail and sensitive to criticism

What to Consider
• Limit activities to 20 to 30 minutes
• Include time for running, climbing and other physical activity
• Give plenty of praise and encouragement
• Include individual and group responsibility and training without pressure
• Expand on the idea of fort-building with loose parts to try animal exhibit-building

Seventh through Eighth Graders
(12 to 13 year olds)
• Show rapid muscular growth
• Demonstrate a wide range of maturity levels
• Tend to be overcritical, rebellious, uncooperative and changeable
• Tend to be self-conscious of personal physical changes
• Show high need for group acceptance and opinion
• Often assert independence from adults, though they are strengthening relationships with specific adults

What to Consider
• Organize games specific to their age levels (co-ed recreation can be difficult)
• Give non-threatening, unobtrusive guidance for skill development
• Foster a feeling of security, being accepted by peer group
• Give opportunities to make decisions
• Ask teams to design animal-based scavenger hunts of the area, then trade lists and have the other team complete the challenge
Tools, Templates and More

Access and download templates and resources from www.aza.org/educator-resources.

Schedule and Calendar Decisions
Use this form to help plan and schedule.

Event Day Checklist
Use this checklist to organize each event.

Places and Spaces Checklist
Use this checklist to help plan and organize your outings in advance.

Sample Sign-in Sheet
You will want to create your own sign-in sheet, approved by your legal or risk management department, but here’s an example to get you started.

Hassle-free Outings Participant Checklist
Use this checklist with families to plan their outings.

Flow of Events Plan
Use this form to plan each outing, being sure to include as much free time as possible.

Disclaimers
The Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) encourages its member institutions to build the children and nature movement and help parents and others learn about ways they can connect children to nature. Family Nature Clubs act independently and neither AZA nor accredited zoos and aquariums hosting such clubs are responsible or liable for the actions of specific groups or individual members of such groups. At all times during which children are outside on their own or with family and friends, everyone should take safety precautions and be mindful of risks.

In no event shall AZA be liable for any direct, indirect, incidental, special, consequential, punitive or exemplary damages, including, without limitation, damages for loss of profits, goodwill, use, data or other intangible losses (even if AZA has been advised of the possibility of such damages), resulting from your use of this Toolkit. In no event shall AZA be liable for any claim, including, without limitation, claims by third parties, for losses or damages arising from any information (whether erroneous or not) contained in the Toolkit.

To the fullest extent permitted by law, you agree to indemnify, defend, and hold harmless AZA and its directors, officers, employees, and agents, from and against all claims, losses, liabilities, expenses, damages, injuries and costs, including reasonable attorneys’ fees, of any kind, nature and description, that arise directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, from your use of this Toolkit or your violation of these Terms of Use.
**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Books**


**Web Resources**

**Animals Inc.**
[www.animalsinc.net/nature-play](http://www.animalsinc.net/nature-play)
Animals Inc. is a digital media company with a social mission to support wildlife conservation through its exclusive affiliation with the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. The Nature Play pages include things to do, places to go, ways to share and connect, and a growing list of resources to support nature play at zoos and aquariums.

**AZA Educator Resources**
[www.aza.org/educator-resources](http://www.aza.org/educator-resources)
This page provides general resources for educators at AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, including information about the Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo/Aquarium project as well as education standards for accreditation, conservation education messages, thematic activities, and more.

**Party for the Planet™**
[www.aza.org/party-for-the-planet](http://www.aza.org/party-for-the-planet)
Party for the Planet™ is AZA’s signature Earth Day event and the largest combined Earth Day celebration in North America! This page offers details about the yearly event in advance of April 22nd.

**World Oceans Day**
[www.worldoceanday.org](http://www.worldoceanday.org)
World Oceans Day is the official UN-designated international day of ocean celebration. On June 8th each year, AZA and its member institutions celebrate the ocean, its importance in our lives, and how we can protect it.

**NatureStart training course**
[www.aza.org/NS](http://www.aza.org/NS)
NatureStart, offered through AZA’s Professional Development Program, is a 5-day training course with content rooted in conservation psychology, early childhood education, and playwork practices, as well as other current research and practices in the emerging field of early childhood conservation education.

**Playful Pedagogy training**
[www.nczoo.org/education/Playful_Pedagogy_.html](http://www.nczoo.org/education/Playful_Pedagogy_.html)
Playful Pedagogy, part of the North Carolina Zoo’s Education Division, offers professional development opportunities for practitioners working in children’s learning and play environments.

**Children & Nature Network**
[www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org)
The Children & Nature Network offers access to the latest news and research in the field of connecting children, families and communities to nature in addition to a variety of resources, tips, ideas, and success stories.

**North American Association for Environmental Education Natural Start Alliance**
[www.naturalstart.org](http://www.naturalstart.org)
The Natural Start Alliance is a coalition of educators, parents, organizations, and others who want to help young children connect with nature and care for the environment. Natural Start is a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE).

**Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood**
Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood presents best practices in child development, environmental education, naturalistic landscaping and conservation design to help ensure that active nature play and exploration remains a cherished part of childhood.

**National Wildlife Federation — Connect Kids and Nature**
The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) presents a variety of programs, tools and resources to connect children and youth with nature including educator resources, how to define and create nature play spaces and activities and more.
About the Association of Zoos & Aquariums

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, animal welfare, education, science and recreation. AZA is the accrediting body for the top zoos and aquariums in the United States and six other countries. Look for the AZA accreditation logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in saving species and your link to helping animals all over the world. To learn more, visit www.aza.org.

About the Children & Nature Network

The Children & Nature Network is fueling a worldwide grassroots movement to create a future in which all children play, learn and grow with nature in their everyday lives. After the publication of *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv and other thought leaders came together in 2006 to co-found the Children & Nature Network (C&NN). Today, because of C&NN’s work and that of many others, the public is now beginning to see the consequences of human alienation from the natural world—what Richard Louv termed “nature-deficit disorder.” The international children and nature movement fueled by C&NN creates a critical link between a connection to nature and improved education, health, and wellness outcomes for children, families and communities. The Children & Nature Network supports grassroots leaders, family nature club leaders, youth leaders, teachers, health professionals, partner organizations and others taking action to create “nature-rich” experiences for children, families and communities. To learn more, visit www.childrenandnature.org.
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We are grateful to each of these contributors and to the many AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums that are actively working to develop their own Family Nature Clubs. We hope this resource substantially serves to further and support the movement to connect children, families, and communities to nature.