



Tyke Hike showcases benefits of nature

Tyke Hikes are one of the many activities the Lodi Valley Chapter offers in order to involve youth on the trail. There is a lot of research pointing to the benefits to children of spending time in nature. Studies have found that nature play supports intellectual, emotional, social, physical and spiritual development. Children who spend time in nature are more creative and are better at problem solving, and show a higher level of curiosity about the world around them. In addition, these children have been found to have more confidence in themselves.

Nature play is different than just being outdoors. Many children participate in outdoor sports and there are benefits to such involvement. Nature play, on the other hand, is all about unstructured time in nature. It's about discovering things in the natural world: the nest in the tree, the bugs that live under the rock, the flowers pushing up through last year's leaves. It's about trying things out, such as seeing how the water current takes a leaf downstream or opening a milkweed pod to look at the seeds inside. Nature play is about using all your senses to be fully aware of the world around you as you hear the sounds of the cranes in the distance or feel the breeze on your face when you walk through the field.

This sounds like something that many of us would like for our children. However, we can't take it for granted that children will experience the joy and wonder of time spent in nature. We, as adults, have an important role to play by modeling enthusiasm for nature. The renowned environmentalist, Rachel Carson, wrote: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

The most effective way to connect our children with nature is to connect ourselves with nature. We need to take time to be amazed by the natural world and provide our children with opportunities to experience their own amazement. Tyke Hikes provide an opportunity for us to participate in some nature play with our young children and help them experience the amazing natural environment all around us. In this way, we promote our children's attachment to nature and appreciation for it, which helps instill a sense of responsibility for the care of the natural world.

As stated by early childhood educator Anita Olds: "There's no way that we can help children to learn to love and preserve this planet if we don't give them direct experience with the miracles and blessings of nature." The health of the earth depends on how young children interact with and respond to nature and, ultimately, how they raise their own children....and so on through the generations.