

Community Voice: Tyke Hike showcases benefits of nature

By Patti Herman | Volunteer, Lodi Valley Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance | Posted: Friday, April 14, 2017 12:15 pm

On Saturday, April 22, the Lodi Valley Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance will offer its first Tyke Hike to celebrate Earth Day. This slow-paced, 1-mile walk is planned especially for young children (accompanied by an adult) and will focus on exploration of nature. Magnifying glasses will be provided so children can take a closer look at the natural world. The walk will start at 10 a.m. at the Robertson Trailhead of the Ice Age Trail on Riddle Road; look for yellow Ice Age Trail Event signs.

So, why offer a Tyke Hike? Why is it important to get young children out in nature? And why plan a Tyke Hike to celebrate Earth Day?

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 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



Tyke Hike

A young hiker looks out over the Ice Age Trail during Lodi Reads Leopold in 2016.

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.

As we celebrate Earth Day – a day set aside to focus on the health of our planet – 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.

I hope to see you at the April 22 Tyke Hike. If you can’t make it, I encourage you to make time to enjoy some nature play with a young child in your backyard, neighborhood park, or other setting. And look for more scheduled Tyke Hikes in the months ahead.

For more information about Tyke Hikes contact coordinator Patti Herman at billpatti@charter.net or 608-843-3924.