



Introduction

Imagine...

Imagine a world where all children grow up respecting themselves, each other, and the natural world around them. Imagine a society where health is the driving force—mental health, physical health, and environmental health—shaping the way kids are raised and guiding the priorities

of our communities. Imagine leaders from around the world making environmental literacy a key focus for all education, inspiring a deep sense of caring and belonging in children and youth.

Is this an impossible dream? The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship is a program that offers a road map to making



Credit: Matthew Walmsley

it a reality for every child, everywhere. It's a starting point for anyone involved in a child's life—parents, teachers, caregivers, grandparents, relatives, and community leaders. In a world consumed by economics and productivity, this approach shifts the focus to nurturing relationships—with each other and with the lands and waters that sustain us. It's the first step toward a future that is equitable, sustainable, and healthy—a journey guided by Indigenous wisdom.

Why Now?

We live in a time of deep division. Political forces have never been more polarized and antagonistic. The pursuit of power, along with religious and racial tensions, have fueled wars of devastating intensity. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen, leaving many more families around the world in the grip of poverty. Leaders often spread misinformation, and the virtual world of digital technology blurs the line between truth and fiction. The COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 amplified these trends, enforcing social separation for three years and increasing our reliance on virtual communication. This stress and frustration sparked a surge of vaccine conspiracy theories and protests against public health measures.

Where are our children in this whirlpool of challenges? How do they deal with an increasingly complex and technologically saturated world? Psychologists are sounding the alarm over an epidemic of mental health issues—ranging from anxiety disorders in children and rising rates of

suicide and substance abuse among youth to widespread feelings of alienation and depression. Teachers report an increase in special needs, including attention deficits and antisocial behaviors, a trend that has worsened since the social isolation of the pandemic. Health care providers are also concerned about declining fitness and health, driven by too little physical activity and too much screen time. This sedentary indoor lifestyle is contributing to a host of health challenges, including heart disease and diabetes.

These issues have led to a surge in research investigating causes and potential solutions, starting in early childhood. With the rise of instant worldwide communication through the internet, stories of child abduction and abuse have led to an exaggerated sense of danger in the real world, even though rates of crime, violence, and other physical risks to children have continued to drop since the 1990s.¹ Parents today have grown increasingly protective, often limiting activities that were once a regular part of childhood, like walking to school, unsupervised outdoor play, tree climbing, and other forms of exploration that might lead to minor scrapes and bruises. In response, many schools have also adopted a more cautious approach, curbing field trips and restricting access to ponds, trees, and natural meadows—all in an effort to avoid potential legal risks.

As a result, children are losing crucial opportunities to test their boundaries, develop resilience, and learn how to assess risk and solve real-world problems inde-

pendently. Meanwhile, early and often unsupervised exposure to screens, the internet, and social media contributes to social anxiety, cyberbullying, and exposure to online predators and violence. While parents believe keeping their children indoors offers greater safety, the reality is often the opposite. This contradiction is known as the “protection paradox.”²

Can we restore a sense of security, belonging, and confidence to those families and communities as they struggle to raise children today? Research consistently points to a common solution: children need ample time for unstructured play in natural outdoor settings, where they can take reasonable risks, solve real-life challenges, engage in creative play, and experience the awe and wonder of the world around them.

Benefits of Unstructured Outdoor Play

- **Better physical health:** children engage in more active play when they're outdoors, resulting in better cardiorespiratory health and improved overall physical fitness.^{3,4,5}
- **Better mental health:** numerous studies point to reduced stress, anxiety, and depression when children and youth have plenty of unstructured time in diverse natural environments.^{6, 7, 8, 9}
- **Improves concentration:** especially for children with attention deficits and hyperactivity, outdoor time improves the ability to focus attention.^{10, 11}
- **Develops cooperation, collaboration, and self-regulation:** children's ability to

overcome obstacles cooperatively and manage their impulses improves when they engage in creative, unstructured outdoor play.^{12, 13, 14}

- **Stimulates creativity:** in natural environments, access to a wide range of materials gives the imagination free rein. Branches can become a fort, twigs and stones can become a house for a fairy, leaves and pebbles of many colors can become beautiful ephemeral art. The possibilities are endless.^{15, 16}

- **Enhances self-esteem:** learning to manage moderate risks (jumping from rock to rock, climbing trees, etc.) helps children overcome fears and build confidence in their abilities.^{17, 18}

- **Develops problem-solving and cognitive abilities:** in outdoor environments with so many variables, children exercise their senses as well as their bodies, which in turn stimulates the brain. Studies show



Credit: Heather Snowball

improvements in cognitive performance in schools with regular opportunities to interact with the natural environment.^{19, 20, 21}

● **Sparks a lifelong interest in learning:** when children are less stressed, in better physical and mental health, and better able to cope with challenges, they bring a more positive attitude to learning. When learning is infused with a spirit of excitement and discovery, a child's innate curiosity is sparked, and a passion for learning can flourish.^{22, 23}

In Waldorf preschool programs, the toys are derived from the natural world, offering limitless possibilities for imaginative and creative play. "Bark from trees can be made into bark boats that float in a puddle. Pieces of moss can be gathered and used to cover the floor of homes that children build in the hollows of tree roots.... Colored leaves in autumn and dandelions in the spring are woven into crowns that are worn by children."²⁴



Credit: Madeleine Endicott

Mentorship

To nurture young people with a lasting sense of connection to and care for their world, plenty of time to play in nature is the first essential ingredient. Studies highlight a second key factor: having a caring role model or mentor who offers the freedom to explore and discover, while also sharing a sense of awe and wonder, and fostering empathy and respect. These studies explored the links between childhood experiences and interest in protecting the environment in later years.^{25, 26, 27}

For very young children, mentors are typically parents, close relatives, or caregivers. As children enter elementary school, mentors may expand to include teachers, older students, or youth leaders. For teens, mentors often include older peers, secondary school teachers, or community leaders. Effective mentors allow young people to guide their own learning, offering support rather than taking the lead. Louise Chawla identifies four key qualities of a strong environmental role model:

- **Care for the land:** through actions or words, encourages care for the land as important for personal identity and well-being;
- **Disapproval of destructive practices:** pointing out to a child when activities are hurtful or harmful to the land or its inhabitants;
- **Pleasure at being out in nature:** demonstrating enjoyment of being in the natural world;
- **Fascination with elements of the natural world:** sharing interesting observations of the Earth, water, sky, plants, and animals (here, a sense of wonder is more important than instructing with facts).²⁸

Only in a natural area children are discovering the qualities of the world with which humanity evolved, on which human existence depends. As children play and explore in nature, they are becoming familiar with essential properties of the biosphere.

— Louise Chawla²⁹

Giving children many opportunities to have positive experiences in the natural world, with access to a caring mentor, is a powerful way to stimulate a sense of community, of belonging, and a sense of responsibility toward the world around them.³⁰ By encouraging children to engage in simple acts of stewardship, we inspire advocacy and an ethic of caring. Every young person, at any age, can have positive impacts on the environment. It's a simple yet powerful formula for nurturing the responsible, engaged citizens of the future.

Sadly, most childhood experiences in our modern world push children in exactly the opposite direction. Many children's days are prescheduled from the moment they wake. Fascination with technology leads to children spending an average of 7½ hours a day in front of a screen.³¹ The pressure to succeed and secure a good job often translates into even more sedentary indoor time spent focusing on literacy and numeracy skills, imagined to be the golden key to future success.

The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship offers a straightforward approach



Credit: Heather Snowball



Credit: Geri-Lynn Cajindos

to giving children what they truly need to thrive—time to connect with nature and their community, a foundation that helps them grow into their healthiest, most resilient selves, eager to face the future and its challenges.

What Is Stewardship?

Words can carry many meanings. When we talk about stewardship, we refer to a deep sense of connection, care, and responsibility for one another and the natural world that sustains us. Stewardship involves personal actions aimed at protecting and improving the health and well-being of both human and natural communities, which are intricately interconnected. It also acknowledges that human health and survival are entirely dependent on thriving ecosystems.

True stewardship means living in ways that respect and strengthen the interdependent web of life that connects all of us. As John Muir wisely observed, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”³²

What Is Kinship?

From a First Peoples’ perspective, we are kin to the living and nonliving world around us. The air, water, soil, rocks, plants, insects, and animals are all part of our community. The term “kinship” recognizes that we belong to the fascinating and complex web of life, and that each strand in the web is equally important. It is crucial to respect the right of other species to exist,

acknowledge their place in the world, and be ready to learn from them.

Fostering stewardship and kinship is a proactive undertaking that must involve many caring mentors—educators, parents, relatives, and youth leaders. These mentors provide a community network that can encourage discovery, share a sense of awe and wonder, and actively cultivate empathy and respect for all life. As children begin to learn how the world functions, they understand the impacts that people can have and explore solutions to challenges in their community. As young people continue to grow toward their teen years, community mentors help to guide them in developing leadership skills by participating in local action, encouraging confidence, agency, hope, and belonging.

The Road Toward Stewardship and Kinship

The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship is a simple, stepwise plan developed, field-tested, and implemented by a community of people who care about kids—perhaps a community just like yours! We believe that cultivating stewardship and kinship in all children is at least as important as literacy and numeracy, and deserves a carefully developed strategy that embraces every young person, throughout their growth and development.

Developing the Pathway involved extensive research and collaboration with people from all walks of life—parents, teachers, early childhood educators, Indigenous

Elders, psychologists, health professionals, politicians, administrators, environmentalists, artists, and students. Community interviews were followed by reviewing research into child development, health, psychology, and environmental education.³³ The results were distilled into a series of 30 simple but powerful “Landmark” activities.

land·mark 1. An object or feature of a landscape or town that is easily seen from a distance, especially one that enables someone to establish their location; 2. An event, discovery or change marking an important stage or turning point in something.

— *Oxford Dictionary*

Each Landmark links to a particular stage of child development, opening the doors to strong lifelong relationships with the land and all its inhabitants, and a sense of responsibility for its well-being.

The Landmarks also provide ideas for inspiring action in a way that builds hope and empowerment, instead of fostering fear. Nurturing stewardship and deepening relationships means not only educating the *head* but also providing experiences that cultivate the *heart* and translate into positive action for the *hands*.³⁴ When these are supported by a host of strong relationships, the resulting rich tapestry connects us to the world around us, giving a sense of belonging, of home, and our place in it. This is what anchors us to our world.

Indigenous Wisdom

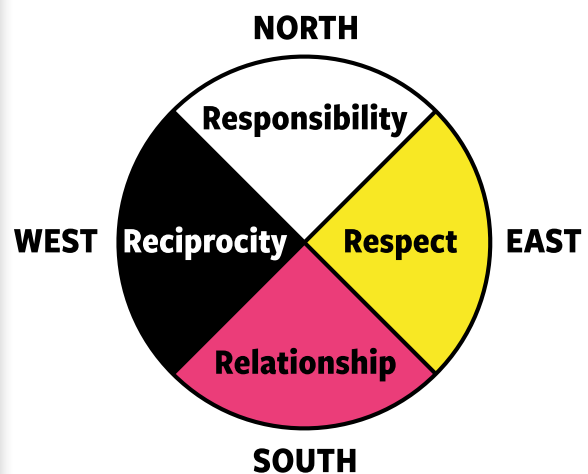
As we continue to learn how to make wise parenting, education, and lifestyle choices, we are grateful for the wisdom of Indigenous cultures that have lived and thrived in a reciprocal and sustainable relationship with the land for millennia. While every Indigenous culture is a unique expression of its relationship with the land, there are common threads that provide a beacon of



Credit: Lisa Gutoskie

direction for all of us in this modern, fragmented, and ailing world.

Anishinaabe scholar and educator Nicole Bell speaks of the 4Rs as a framework for developing our relationship with the land.³⁵ Using the medicine wheel as a model of ongoing learning and growth, she explains that we must begin with respect (in the east, as the rising sun)—respect for ourselves and all creation. With that sense of respect, we can begin to develop meaningful relationships with each other and other beings (moving to the south). We must also bring a sense of reciprocity into all of these relationships; not only taking but considering how we can give back as well (in the west, on the medicine wheel). Finally, respect, relationship, and reciprocity grow into a sense of responsibility to live in a way that benefits all creation (moving to the north, to complete the cycle). This is an ongoing process that keeps repeating and strengthening



Medicine wheel interpretation based on the teachings of Nicole Bell.

throughout life. These are important teachings that can provide a firm foundation for guiding children and youth as they learn, grow, and find their own unique place in the world.

Another principle common to many Indigenous cultures is the importance of intergenerational relationships in a child's

education. At home, at school, and in the broader community, children benefit from having mentors of many ages, from a variety of walks of life. If these mentors honor and respect each child as an individual, they can contribute to a deep sense of belonging, of a community safety and support network.



Credit: Julie Stater

With the support of many wise and caring mentors, and plentiful opportunities for unstructured outdoor time, the foundation is laid for a child to develop a strong sense of stewardship and kinship. We have heard from many Indigenous advisors, “The Land is the first teacher. The Land is the best teacher.”

Especially in these bewildering times, this is a powerful place to begin—whoever you are, and wherever you live.

We are grateful to the many Indigenous Elders, Knowledge holders, friends, and community leaders who provided guidance in developing the Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship. Their voices can be heard throughout these pages. Our deepest thanks for your generosity.

Climate Change

During the years of developing and field-testing the Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship, climate change has become an ever more urgent issue around the world. More than ever, we need to cultivate leadership and problem-solving skills in young people of all ages, involve them in meaningful action projects, and give them opportunities to witness real-life success stories. Gloom-and-doom scenarios may boost ratings and social media hits, but they do not generate hope, nor provide incentive for long-term action. The Pathway Landmarks include many activities that guide us away from energy-consumptive activities and emphasize active trans-

portation, renewable energy, and getting involved in local action projects. As young people learn how our choices impact the world around us and explore more sustainable lifestyles, their parents and other educators can benefit and learn too.

Recent research suggests that involving young people in social justice issues can be another powerful springboard toward a commitment to climate change action in adults. This is a reminder that strong social ties paired with strong environmental ties can be a catalyst for fostering personal, environmental, and community health.³⁶

Who Is This For?

This stewardship framework enhances and complements existing parenting guides, school curricula, and community programs. The recommendations can be adapted to suit any school, early childhood learning center, community group, or age group, offering ideas for family activities, action projects for children of all ages, and guidance for community groups planning or running programs for youth. It creates a shared focus that benefits everyone involved.

The more widely these core principles are embraced across all sectors of a community, the greater the impact on children’s health and long-term well-being—on a global scale. We don’t need large budgets or elaborate preparation. We can, and must, start now.



Key Stewardship Principles

Though many activities in this book are tailored to specific ages and stages of childhood, the guiding principles are timeless, universal, and relevant for all ages, regions, and cultures. These principles form the core of the Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship's approach, providing a foundation that nurtures deep connections, a sense of responsibility, and a pathway toward building healthy, thriving communities—both now and for future generations.

Adults are powerful role models for young people. You don't need to know the names or how everything functions in nature to be an effective mentor, but you do need to bring a positive and respectful attitude. This sends a message that resonates with children long after the experience. Even very young children can be taught to touch gently, step carefully, and observe quietly, ensuring no harm is done. Always return creatures to their habitats after observing them, sharing the excitement of how amazing they are. When adults model these behaviors, the message of stewardship becomes far more impactful than words alone.

This is a summary of the stewardship principles that are equally important for all ages and should be practiced and en-

couraged by everyone who interacts with young people.

Respect for Each Other and All Nature

A fundamental value in fostering stewardship is the recognition that life, in all its forms, is amazing and that every being—human or nonhuman—deserves respect. As adults, it may require some personal reflection and the resolve to overcome fears or biases we've developed, so that we can become effective mentors for children on their journey toward stewardship. One simple way to cultivate respect and empathy is by providing children with positive experiences with animals, whether wild or domestic.



Credit: Jessica Carey

In Indigenous worldviews, even non-living elements are believed to possess a spirit—threads that weave together the fabric of life. Water, air, rocks, along with plants and animals, all play vital roles in creation and are equally deserving of respectful relationships.

This principle is so fundamental, it is recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that “education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the natural environment.”³⁷



Credit: Sonya Friesen

Sense of Awe and Wonder

We are never too old to appreciate the wonders of life, or to encourage and share that sense of awe that results from truly seeing the world around us. Awe and wonder fuel curiosity and a desire to learn, sparking the lifelong joy of discovery. We forget as adults how powerful language can be. If you want to cultivate a sense of wonder, you need to use the language of wonder. Phrases such as “Isn’t this amazing! I wonder...let’s go find out more” help to open a child’s eyes to the miracle of life itself.^{38,39}

When we truly exercise all our senses regularly, and notice tiny things as well as the big picture, we’re much more likely to see the miracles happening around us every day. It’s remarkable how much more you see when you travel on foot, rather than any type of faster moving vehicle. Slowing down, looking carefully, listening intently, smelling the seasonal changes, and encouraging children to touch the textures of nature draw us into a fascinating community of life that too often goes unnoticed.

Natural Curiosity and Discovery

It is a wise teacher who knows when to share information and when to step back and let natural discoveries take place. Overloading children with facts can inhibit their interest in learning and discovering. The most effective learning centers on the child, not the teacher. Keep in mind that the engine of learning is curiosity.⁴⁰ As adults, we need to remember that a name



Credit: Danielle Blondin



Credit: Grace Beaumont

or a label is merely a beginning point. It is the start of a story—an intriguing one—and it is up to you to keep the story going! A good question should invite other questions. Think about your questions as ways to encourage kids to ask why, to wonder, to marvel at the natural world and to promote further exploration.

Sense of Place

An important part of developing a sense of security and belonging is spending enough time outdoors in the same place to become deeply familiar and connected with it. For those who have developed a particular attachment to a place when growing up, that sense of place becomes part of their identity. It is important to give children plenty of time to develop those

deep attachments to place, whether that's a favorite park, a cottage, a camp, or other outdoor place with special memories.⁴¹

Every place on Earth is unique. Is your home near a forest, a grassland, a wetland or lake? Do you live on the arctic tundra, near a desert, or on the ocean shore? Is your home in a tropical or temperate rainforest, or do you live in the mountains? Getting to know and fall in love with the place you call home kindles a sense of family and belonging that extends beyond your human relatives. No other person on Earth is the same as you, and the place you live is unlike anywhere else. Taking the time to explore and grow “roots” in your home place takes time and patience but enriches our lives profoundly with a deep and lasting sense of connection.



Credit: Kathy Connelly

Sense of Gratitude

Often, we become so preoccupied by daily pressures and challenges that we become oblivious to the many wonders and gifts around us. Wisdom from many faith communities and Indigenous ceremonies remind us to take time every day to recognize and appreciate the many gifts of creation.⁴² This can begin with being more aware and mindful of the world around us—taking time to be calm, quiet, and present in the moment and seeing the wonders around us. It is also important to practice gratitude. The act of giving thanks helps to strengthen our connections to each other and to the special places that are an inte-

gral part of every community. A sense of gratitude helps to strengthen mental health at all stages of life.

The container is now full and the class is very excited to begin boiling the sap tomorrow. Wow! We are thankful for the maples trees that gave us this gift.

— Indrani Talapatra (teacher)

Interconnectedness

Children benefit from many opportunities to learn how our lives are connected to the lives of other people and all things in nature. We share the same air, the same water—the food we eat contains nutrients

made from atoms that have circulated for eons.⁴³ This understanding reinforces our innate need to belong. Stewardship involves understanding that we belong to a community that extends far beyond our close friends and relatives and includes the living systems that are integral to health. Let's encourage all children to get to know and love their "Neighbourhood."⁴⁴

When you observe something in nature, think about the many ways that it is connected to its environment. What kind of habitat does it live in? What does it eat? Who eats it? How does it reproduce? How much space does it need? How does it move? Where does it find water? What was it doing when you discovered it? Was it camouflaged, or did it stand out from the things around it? Are there many others like it, or is this the only one? The questions we can ask to deepen our understanding of the world around us are limitless.

While the science of ecology is a relatively new field of study, Indigenous Peoples have known for millennia that all things, both living and nonliving, are deeply interconnected and equally important. Humans are no more important than any other part of creation, with each being a vital thread in the tapestry of life.

Mentorship at All Ages

A recurring theme in many research studies is the importance of children spending time with a caring mentor in developing a sense of caring and connection that will last into their adult lives. In the early years, the mentor is usually a close relative such



Credit: Indrani Talapatra



Credit: Lisa Guroskie



Credit: Nancy Hurley

as a parent or grandparent who spends time with the child, exploring together and sharing the delights of discovery.⁴⁵

As a child grows older, mentors begin to include favorite teachers or other youth leaders who become trusted and admired role models.⁴⁶ While having knowledge to share with a child is helpful, it's more important to share an interest and inspire curiosity.⁴⁷ Seniors can be valuable mentors for children, and opportunities for intergenerational learning can be of mutual benefit.

While access to many mentors is important, children also need plenty of time to explore on their own and with other children. Wise mentors leave plenty of room for self-guided discovery. A mentor provides support and encouragement, but minimal “instruction.” It is also important to remember that older children can become mentors of younger children, and that the art of mentoring is a skill that can be practiced and refined over time.



Credit: Karen Brown

Learning from Local Indigenous Cultures

Wherever you live around the world, local Indigenous cultures provide invaluable guidance in learning to live in harmony with the unique place that is your home. While Euro-Western economic systems put a stamp of “sameness” on everything from buildings, services, and even to landscapes (e.g., the ubiquitous lawn aesthetic), Indigenous cultures developed over millennia as a result of intimate relationships specifically with the land where they lived.

Look for opportunities to learn from your region's Indigenous Peoples at special events throughout the year, and by getting to know, support, and develop friendships with First Peoples wherever you live. This is a meaningful way to help restore the value and significance of peoples and cultures that have been marginalized for far too long. Indigenous knowledge offers essential insights in our journey to relearn how to live sustainably in harmony with the land—no matter where we call home.

Overcoming Fears

Not everyone feels comfortable and safe outdoors—especially in natural areas. Building comfort and security outdoors is something you can learn, with patience and practice. This can begin by dressing appropriately for all weather, so you feel comfortable in all conditions. If possible, provide very young children with a mud suit to wear over their clothes so they can delight in jumping in puddles and playing in mud without a fear of getting dirty. Dress in layers in cold or inclement weather so it's easy to remove layers if necessary to stay comfortable. Get children used to wearing hats and sunscreen on sunny summer days and pay attention to public health recommendations for your area (e.g., wearing long pants and tucking in socks in places where ticks are present and doing tick checks when you get home). Don't let fear of harm keep you and your children indoors! The more you become familiar with the place where you live, and make reasonable precautions a part of daily



Credit: Anne-Marie Jackson

routines, the more comfortable everyone will be spending time outdoors.

Learn the real dangers (falling over cliffs, drowning, etc.) and learn how to handle them (stay away from the edge, learn how to swim, etc.). Fear of the dark, animals, insects, snakes, etc. can all be overcome with patience. Working on our own fears as adults can help our children become more confident and less anxious and fearful. Never push a fearful person into doing something that makes them uncomfortable. Rather encourage them to take small, incremental steps in managing their fear, with plenty of praise and support for each step along the way.

Child development experts are concerned that overprotecting our kids, with the best of intentions, has the opposite result to what we wish for them. When



Credit: Craig Brant

children aren't given the opportunity to engage in moderately risky play, they don't develop confidence in their abilities and are more likely to remain anxious and fearful. When a child, for example, masters the skill of crossing a small stream by balancing on a log, they are proud of their accomplishment and eager to share their mastery with others. Getting scrapes is a normal part of growing up, and letting children take reasonable risks (jumping, climbing) helps them to stretch their abilities, learn their limits, and build resiliency. Learning to overcome fears literally opens the doors to a world of wonders.^{48, 49, 50}

Practicing Independence

Another fundamental principle confirmed by many research studies is the importance

of giving children opportunities to practice as much independence as their age and capabilities will allow. That can begin at a very young age by encouraging children's innate desire to help. Letting young children set the table or assist with simple food preparation helps to develop skills for independence and fosters a sense of self-worth.⁵¹

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, recounts the story of a seventh grade teacher who was so concerned about her students' fears of doing anything on their own (for risk of failure or ridicule) that she created a new program that she called the Let Grow Project. Over the school year, each student was given a homework assignment to complete 20 different tasks on their own, and report on

their experiences. Suggested tasks included things such as doing the family laundry, preparing a simple meal, walking to the park with friends, riding the bus without an adult, or other ideas of their own choosing. Students were so excited by their accomplishments, there was a noticeable boost in confidence and self-esteem.⁵² Parents were amazed by the capabilities and responsibility shown by their children and felt comfortable giving them more freedom.

Since the rise of overprotective parenting in the 1980s and 1990s, parents have been afraid to let their children out of their sight. That has resulted in driving children to school instead of letting them walk, driving them to the local store for picking up a few groceries, and accompanying them on all outdoor activities. This has become such a cultural norm that parents have actually been reprimanded or charged for letting their children walk or cycle in their neighborhood on their own or to ride the bus to visit a friend or attend a program. The days of neighborhood kids playing outside without an adult are a thing of the past in many communities. This has further restricted physical activity and limited children's opportunities to make decisions, travel and play safely on their own, resolve conflicts with their friends, and look after each other without an adult's presence.

Travelling without an adult is what the experts call "independent mobility." Travelling a regular route alone or with peers is an excellent way to sharpen skills of observation, enhance interest in and knowledge of the environment, as well as



Credit: Stock

promote a sense of security.^{53,54} Children permitted to travel regular routes independently also tend to play outside more frequently, leading to the host of benefits previously mentioned, such as stress reduction, creative thinking, problem-solving, and increased self-esteem.⁵⁵

While very young children cannot be expected to understand the dangers of traffic, older children who demonstrate awareness, understanding, and basic safety should be rewarded with corresponding degrees of freedom of movement. This is a difficult concept for today's cautious parents to implement for fear of reprisal from other adults. It can be helpful to work together with other local parents

to encourage children walking or cycling together to school, a local park, or a nearby convenience store. The 2015 report from Participaction, called *The Biggest Risk Is Keeping Kids Indoors*, is a well-documented examination of the risks and benefits of independent mobility.⁵⁶ The age at which children can handle independent travel will vary from child to child, but typically between ages 8 and 10 is a good time to start the process with short-distance travel, gradually broadening the range as young people demonstrate responsibility and the ability to handle the freedom.

Accessibility

Differences in physical abilities need not deter anyone from enjoying time in nature. Tools such as all-terrain wheelchairs may be available to borrow from a variety of nearby children's service providers. Many outdoor centers and public parks now provide tools for accessibility, so that anyone can participate in nature adventures. These can include tools such as hoists for lifting children into boats and special harnesses for wall climbing. Exciting new developments in accessibility are becoming rapidly available to everyone, so be sure to check out what is available in your area.

Limits to Screen Time

Another recurring recommendation, both in research and feedback from parents and community leaders, points to the benefits of limiting screen time—television, computer, and especially smartphones. Too much screen time severely limits physical

activity, social and creative development, as well as causing a sense of separation from the real world. While technology can offer many benefits, too much of it can be toxic to healthy development.⁵⁷ Many educators are so concerned about the negative impacts of social media on young people's mental health that they propose banning cell phones from schools and severely restricting young people's access to smartphones altogether.

Jonathan Haidt has researched the impact of smartphones and 24/7 access to social media on the mental health of young people in his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. He points out dramatic numbers of anxiety and depression disorders, particularly in preteen and teenaged girls, beginning around 2010. This was the time when smartphones became widely available, and most teens had their own smartphone within a couple of years. Girls became obsessed with social media, which started a catastrophic rise in anxiety. Boys tended to be more obsessed by video gaming and access to pornography. In both cases, in-person social interaction declined significantly, replaced by online social interaction. Depressive disorders in the U.S. rose by 145 percent in teenaged girls between 2010 and 2020 and by 161 percent in teenaged boys. Preteen suicide rates rose sharply during the same time period.

Similar trends were also found in Canada, Australia, England, and the Nordic countries. Haidt recommends that

schools be phone-free for students, and that children should not have access to smartphones before high school, with no exposure to social media before age 16. He further recommends that parents oversee their children's online time and implement parental controls and content filters on all digital devices at home. Numerous health agencies have similar recommendations on limiting children's access to recreational screen time: none before age 2 years; limited access between 2 and 6 years; no more than two hours per day for 6- to 12-year-olds. For teens, it's helpful to discuss and agree on family guidelines together, such as no screens during mealtimes and everyone turning off screens an hour before bedtime.

However, there can be positive use made of tablets and smartphones in outdoor education by harnessing young people's interest in technology. Some apps are helpful in enhancing outdoor knowledge and skill and, if used with discretion, can be powerful learning tools for youth. Apps such as iNaturalist can help with identifying natural features, and Citizen Science apps such as eBird can encourage young people to participate in collecting information about wildlife to assist with local and regional conservation efforts.

Creative Expression

The arts provide one of the most powerful ways of developing and expressing morals and values, which are a foundation of mental health. Research refers repeatedly to the importance of providing opportunities at all ages to express feelings. Discussion,



Credit: Julie Stoter



Credit: Craig Brant

painting, drama, stories, music, dance, poetry, photography, sculpture, and music are a few examples of the ways we express ourselves and learn from others.

The arts are also an important vehicle for developing empathy and sympathy by imagining ourselves inside the lives of other beings.⁵⁸ While young people may prefer certain ways of expressing themselves at various ages, creative expression overall remains an important factor in healthy development throughout life.⁵⁹ The natural world provides many opportunities for inspiration and reflection, as well as providing a wealth of materials for artistic expression.

Action and Giving Back

Everyone, no matter their age or ability, can do something positive for the world around them. Tending a garden, raising

butterflies, caring for a natural area, and reducing our energy consumption are just some of the simple ways we empower young people to make a positive impact right in their own communities. A foundational stewardship principle is considering how we can give back to the Earth that supports us. Kids can solve a problem provided they are given the right tools and strategies for their age. Every positive action leads to a sense of hope, and every bit of hope is empowering.

However, in a world grappling with climate change, species loss, and pollution, it's crucial to provide children with age-appropriate information that matches their emotional and cognitive development. Introducing overwhelming problems, especially at too young an age, risks fostering what some call “ecophobia” or “ecoanxiety,” a sense of paralysis or apathy



Credit: iStock

that stems from feeling powerless in the face of global environmental challenges. Instead, by focusing on solutions and actions close to home, we can help children see how their efforts matter. As kids grow older, they can begin to explore the idea of sustainable living: reducing their carbon footprint, exploring alternatives to fossil fuels, learning about product life cycle and social justice issues.^{60,61,62} Taking action and finding ways to give back helps young people develop a sense of agency, empowerment, and hope for the future.

Never Too Late to Start

What if your kids are already in their middle years or teens? Is it too late to start the Pathway Landmarks and activities? It's never too late—even if you're an adult who has rarely been outdoors and has many fears. This program is for everyone, at all

ages, regardless of when you start on the path. The key is to support each other as we learn new ideas and skills for responsible and rewarding involvement within our communities and our world. Each Landmark is a springboard for activities that help children to grow, thrive, and connect to the world around them.

The Power of Joy

All of the suggested activities in this book are grounded in the knowledge that great joy can be found in nature and being outdoors, and that joy is contagious. Laughter, a powerful stress reliever, and a sense of fun are woven into every Landmark. The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship is a rewarding journey for both children and their mentors. We all benefit by raising healthy children for a healthy planet.



Credit: Shayla Bush

We visited our outdoor learning space and explored new trails. We also noticed how we felt when we were outside!

— Shayla Bush (teacher)

Using the Key Themes Chart

All of these basic principles are important throughout childhood and adulthood,

as we travel together toward a culture of stewardship and kinship. The following chart summarizes samples of key stewardship themes common to all ages, as well as those that are particularly critical at specific stages of development. This is a broad overview of concepts underlying the principles, landmarks, and activities suggested in the Landmarks section that follows.

Key Stewardship Themes	Age 0–3	Age 4–5	Age 6–7	Age 8–10	Age 11–13	Age 14–18
Respect for self, other people, other beings						
Sense of belonging, sense of place						
Positive interactions with animals						
Creative expression						
Empathy for others						
Sensory development						
Learning through play						
Learning through social interaction						
Outdoor exploration with a supportive relative						
Having a supportive, knowledgeable mentor (other than family)						
Understanding interconnectedness of all things						
Participation in hands-on community projects						
Opportunities to practice leadership						
Unguided outdoor exploration						
Longer periods outdoors (overnight camping, hiking, canoeing)						
More complex outdoor skills and adventure sports						
Exploring social justice and other global/community issues						

Note:

- Each theme is accompanied by a colored bar showing ideal ages for exploring various skills and concepts.
- Remember that everyone is different, and we all grow and develop in different ways! These themes are a simple visual guide only.
- Light shading in a bar indicates some benefit for that age group, deepening to more intense color as potential benefits increase at other stages of life.



Landmarks



Credit: Emily Warren



Credit: Jackie Donaldson

We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done.

— ALAN TURING (mathematician)

About the Landmarks

In a world facing ever-growing environmental and social challenges, we have crafted a road map to guide children on their journey to becoming compassionate stewards of the Earth. The Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship's approach is grounded in research, shaped by community input, and has been thoroughly tested across an entire region. This strategic framework offers critical experi-

ences tailored to each stage of a child's development, nurturing a sense of caring, connection, and responsibility toward one another and the Earth we share. These experiences are distilled into the Pathway's 30 Landmarks—a simple yet powerful tool for families, educators, and communities to engage with young people at home, in school, and beyond. Each Landmark represents a collection of age-appropriate actions designed to inspire, activate, and empower children and youth to create a better world for themselves and future generations.

The Pathway features several Landmarks for each age group, building on the skills and experiences gained from earlier stages. However, the journey is not strictly linear. Older teens can benefit from revisiting earlier Landmarks, while younger children may find inspiration in Landmarks slightly ahead of their age group. Spanning the years from birth through late adolescence, these Landmarks can be easily integrated into any program. No matter

your experience or background, the Landmarks offer a common starting point for fostering stewardship and kinship. There are many ways to interpret and implement each Landmark. We've suggested a few ways that we have found children have responded to but you may have your own ideas, and that's excellent! Adapt these ideas to fit your interests, abilities, and resources but keep in mind—repeated involvement is the key.

The following pages illustrate how each Landmark can be brought to life, showcasing how communities can weave these activities into everyday routines. With over 14,000 participants from one community contributing to the Pathway Project between 2017 and 2023, countless stories demonstrate the many ways to make each Landmark a vibrant part of daily life. We've also included inspiring quotes and reflections from those who have experienced the impact of the Landmarks firsthand. Join us and imagine a healthy, vibrant world as we travel the Pathway together...



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Landmarks for the Early Years (Birth to 3 Years)

Birth to 3 Years:

Characteristics of This Age Group

In the first few months of life, babies learn more rapidly than at any other time. Everything is fresh and everything is new. As their eyes begin to focus shortly after birth, they begin to respond to faces, and they eagerly reach out to grasp everything around them. The natural world is filled with a rich tapestry of sights, sounds, smells, and textures that invite engagement. The desire to be active in the world spurs great physical advances—rolling over, sitting up, crawling, and finally, the ability to walk!

Babies' brains are wired to notice and categorize details through their senses—that is how they make “sense” of the world around them. Allison Gopnik calls this “lantern consciousness,” a state of being “lit up” and tuned into everything that is occurring around them. Repeated experiences outdoors create a stimulating environment that fosters exploration and cognitive development and lays the foundation for a deep and lasting connection to the natural world.

There is an enormous leap in the ability to explore when babies become mobile—whether crawling or walking. For this reason, the following Landmark activities for very young children are divided into “Infant” (not mobile) and “Toddler/Preschooler” (walking or crawling on their own). Both groups feel a great sense of security from the presence of their caregivers, and will quickly mimic their responses to things around them—whether that’s joyful and eager or fearful and withdrawn. For this reason, it’s important to bring a positive attitude of wonder and curiosity to the time you spend outdoors together.

Preschoolers are captivated by stories, music, rhythm, and rhyme, soaking in the sounds of speech as they start to express themselves in words. Songs and rhymes about animals are especially popular, helping to nurture early connections with the natural world and nonhuman friends. Time spent with a young child is a precious opportunity to slow down, unwind, laugh, and explore the wonders of the world together.



Credit: Sarah Langer

BIRTH–3 YRS**Landmark 1**

**Explore outdoors together
at least twice each week
and more if you can!**

Why?

Visiting natural areas regularly benefits everyone—adults and children alike. Regardless of the weather or the season, time outside makes everyone healthier and opens our eyes to nature’s wonders. Helping a child feel at home and comfortable in a natural setting, even from their earliest hours, prepares a lifelong foundation for caring, connecting, and belonging. Parents and caregivers are important role models to encourage discovery and to show respect for the living systems that sustain us. Help your child be amazed by the natural world by being amazed yourself. Give your gift of time and go outside with your child—observe and explore and wonder together.

Climate Change Connections

Whenever you engage in activities that don’t require outside energy sources (walking instead of driving a car, etc.), you help your child learn to live a more climate-friendly lifestyle. All of the following activities are climate-friendly. When exploring outdoors, look for nearby places within walking distance, whenever possible.

How?**Infants**

- **On a Blanket:** Lie on a blanket and watch the clouds; lie in the grass and look into the branches of a tree.
- **Tummy Time:** Encourage time on the tummy and allow your infant to sit or crawl directly on grass or a soft bed of moss.
- **Stroller Explorer:** Be a stroller explorer and explore your neighborhood and local park. Don’t forget to stop and take your little one out of the stroller to experience what you encounter along the way.
- **Sunlight and Shadows:** Place your infant in a pool of sunlight and watch the dust angels float by. Show your infant the play of shadows and light on the ground. Create shadows together with your hands and arms or with a natural object, helping them notice the shifting patterns of light and dark.
- **Natural Touches:** Let your infant touch and feel various natural objects: a feather, a clump of moss, a leaf, a smooth stone, a stick, a shell.
- **Natural Sounds:** Sit quietly with your infant and together listen to the sounds of nature—the rustling of leaves, chirping of birds, or the gentle hum of insects. Can you

imitate some of these sounds in a gentle song or hum?

- **Smell the Flowers:** Hold your infant close to different flowers, herbs, or leaves and let them experience various natural scents.

- **Water Play:** On a warm day, bring your infant near a stream, puddle, or shallow basin of water. Let them touch the water with their hands or feet, feeling the coolness and movement.

- **Nature Bath:** On a warm day, bring a small portable tub or pool outside and give your infant a gentle bath in nature.

- **Bug Watching:** Find a safe spot where insects like ants, beetles, or butterflies are active. Hold your infant close and let them watch the small creatures move.

Toddlers/Preschoolers

- **Curiosity and Wonder:** Tap into your child's natural curiosity and sense of wonder; have fun and ask questions such as how do you think this got here, where is this from, who was visiting and what do you think happened? To encourage wonder, use the language of wonder. Phrases like "Wow! Is that ever amazing!" and "Did you see that?" encourage your child to ask their own questions and show interest in where their curiosity takes them.

- **Familiarity:** Visit the same places frequently, to build familiarity and comfort.

- **Clothing:** Dress for all weather conditions; raincoats and boots can make rainy days fun!

- **Play and Imagination:** Provide time, space, and materials for imaginative play and engagement. Play make-believe,



**We must teach our children to
smell the earth, to taste the
rain, to touch the wind, to see
things grow, to hear the sun
rise and night fall—to care.**

— JOHN CLEAL (artist)



Credit: Matt Warren



Children still need a childhood with dirt,
mud, puddles, trees, sticks and tadpoles.

— BROOKE HAMPTON (author of
Enchanted Cedar: The Journey Home)

Credit: Emily Warren



Credit: Nancy Doherty

The rain spattered our play, and the wind was wild! This weather didn't interfere with our fun though, and our climbing feet were eager, and our minds were curious.

— EMILY WARREN (early childhood educator)

explore, and imagine. Dig in soil, wade in water, pick up sticks, roll in the grass, squeeze and play with mud. Climb, jump, hop, roll, laugh! Enjoy “puddle duck days” in the rain together. Jump in leaves, play hide-and-seek. Experience rain and snow, smell flowers, splash in mud, feel tree bark, catch insects, dance together!

- **Experience as Teacher:** Focus on experiences rather than teaching—let your child take the lead. Explore together but go at the child's pace. Allow them to show you what interests them and delight in their discoveries.

- **Nature Treasures:** Create a nature treasure box or a wonder box. Decorate your container and use this to store your precious finds—a feather, a colorful stone, a shell, a four-leaf clover.

- **The Underworld:** Turn over rocks and logs to see what lives underneath (put them back when you're done). Follow a beetle, an ant, a worm—where do they go?

- **Mud Play:** Make mud pies and decorate with flowers, grasses, and leaves.