



# WILD + FREE GROUPS

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BY PAULA CAGGIANO  
PHOTOS BY KERRI ANNE MCGOWAN



All over the world from Australia to Africa, the United States to Uganda, hundreds of Wild + Free Groups regularly meet to go on nature hikes and explore the world around them. You will find them gathering at local parks in the city, hiking up remote mountains, walking through forests, visiting local museums, and hosting book clubs and handcraft fairs.

The beauty of our Wild + Free Groups is that each one is unique and a reflection of the individual members of the local group and area, all the while still sharing in the philosophy and heart of our worldwide Wild + Free community. If you're not already a part of a group and desire to find your tribe, you can connect with an existing group in your area by checking our Groups Map on our website. If there isn't one in your area, you might consider starting your own!

I get asked all of the time, how do I start a Wild + Free Group, where do I begin? It's a fantastic question, with a simple answer: you start by finding just one other like-minded family, one who shares your love of nature, adventure and the belief that children thrive when they are given the freedom to learn, play and explore the world around them.





Once you have made that connection, set up a location and time to start your Wild + Free adventure together. It's really that simple, and from that starting point, your group will grow, evolve and take shape. For example, our local group in Hampton Roads, Virginia started with only a couple of families meeting at a local city park where we would take our kids geocaching.

After the first couple of times we realized that we really enjoyed our nature adventures and wanted to continue meeting on a more regular basis. From there we started meeting monthly for nature hikes, and between word of mouth and social media, we now have 20-30+ families who regularly join us on nature hikes, field trips and special events like the fall handcraft fair we just hosted.

One of the first families who helped to start our local group is the Kelley Nichols and her kiddos. Kelley and I first met at the Williamsburg, VA Wild + Free conference and realized almost immediately we had found part of our tribe in each other. Kelley homeschools her five children, two of which have been adopted from China.







## CAN YOU SHARE A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND CHILDREN?

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My husband and I have five children, ages 14, 10, 8, 5 and 1. Our big kids are homegrown, belly babes. And our younger girls are both adopted. We brought our 5-year-old home from China when she was 2.5 and adopted our baby when she was just a month old. Both girls have Down syndrome and complex heart disease. We live on a tiny stretch of the harbor in Hampton, Virginia and spend our days outdoors, exploring and creating adventures.

This is our ninth-year homeschooling. We wanted something different than traditional schooling could offer. And it's been such a blessing throughout the different seasons of our life (whether that's traveling together to China or needing to slow down due to medical needs and extended hospital stays).



## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE BEING A PART OF OUR GROUP?

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We must live this season with a day by day approach. We love our group and want to attend every group gathering. But (often) someone is sick and/or in the hospital as the day of the event approaches.

## WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF BEING A PART OF THE W+F GROUP?

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Oh goodness, these people are my people. I love the encouragement I get surrounded by mamas who understand the privilege we have to raise these amazing little people to become their own person, confident in who God created them to be. I love the freedom to just be us. I love the focus on nature and the beauty from a simple hike on the beach. I love that play and exploration and creativity are encouraged as the most important things and not distractions. We struggled to find a good fit in the world of homeschooling. And this group gives us the freedom to be ourselves.







## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ACTIVITIES THAT WORK WELL FOR YOU AS A FAMILY?

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As a mama of children with special needs, our lives can feel pretty isolated. This group gives us a much-needed connection to community. Both of our girls have Down syndrome and our 5-year-old spent half her sweet life in an orphanage. She gets easily overstimulated and resorts to institutional behaviors (stimming—such as rocking or head banging). Playgroups and meet-ups in “kid friendly” places such as indoor playgrounds or even someone’s home can be quite overwhelming for her. But her connection to nature is calming. It soothes her.

Our Wild + Free groups gather in natural settings, which give my daughter positive sensory input. And peace. Also, practically speaking, Paula always chooses places that can accommodate our stroller. Our youngest daughter has a feeding tube and is on several oxygen and heart monitors. She’s not easily carried for long distances and her equipment is too bulky to carry, so stroller friendly trails are a must.



## AND WHAT ARE THE ONES THAT ARE MORE OF A CHALLENGE?

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Our group has been amazing at choosing gatherings that will include my family. And can I add how meaningful that is? Because we are often isolated (whether in the hospital or home with a sick baby), it is easy for many to forget about us or assume we cannot attend. Many families with special needs stop getting invited places. It speaks to the heart of this group that our family is not just included, but our participation is valued and accommodated.





**WHAT WOULD YOU SAY  
TO SOMEONE WHO HAS  
A SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD  
BUT IS HESITANT TO GET  
INVOLVED IN A GROUP?**

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Reach out to the group coordinator and share your needs! Attend an event that you feel you can manage. Share your story with these families and people will come along side of you, to offer practical help and that soul nourishing encouragement that comes from such genuine hospitality.







## HOW CAN A LOCAL GROUP DO PRACTICALLY FOR FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN?

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Ask questions! Identify needs and work together to come up with gatherings that can accommodate everyone. When planning any event, include in the event details helpful info such as, handicap accessible trail or stroller friendly, sensory friendly (bounce houses, indoor playgrounds, etc. are NOT sensory friendly). This opens up dialogue for special need mamas to ask questions and (hopefully) decide there's a place for them in the Wild + Free community!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Paula Caggiano is married to her husband David and a homeschooling mama to four amazing kiddos. Paula grew up in Canada but is now a dual-citizen who calls both Virginia and North Carolina home. In a world where deep, meaningful relationships with others are becoming harder to cultivate, she is passionate about pursuing that not only in her life but others as well. As the Wild + Free Groups Co-ordinator she loves nothing more than connecting mamas all over the world with each other, their tribe. When she's not homeschooling or working for Wild + Free you will most likely find Paula and her family heading to their lake house in NC, their happy place (with friends, of course!).

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## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

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Kerri Anne McGowan is a recent high school graduate. Being homeschooled her entire life has allowed her the time and freedom to focus on her passion for the arts! She was a dancer from ages 5 to 17 and now is a tap teacher at a local dance studio. Upon graduating, Kerri Anne also pursued her love for photography and started a business, Talking Cactus Photography, specializing in portraits, weddings, and real estate photography.