

FINDING YOUR PEOPLE

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a white t-shirt, sitting on a wooden play structure. She is surrounded by four children: a girl with blonde hair in a grey shirt, a boy with blonde hair in a grey shirt, a boy with brown hair in a yellow shirt, and a boy with brown hair in a blue shirt. They are all playing on the structure in a wooded area with sunlight filtering through the trees.

BY CLAIRE FORD
PHOTOS BY LACEY JINKS

Have you ever walked into a group of strangers and quickly known that you were right where you belonged? That you were meant to know those specific people at that time in your life? I thought about not going to my first Wild + Free group gathering. We were still new to the state, new to homeschooling, and didn't know a single name or face ahead of time.

I—the mother!—was the one hesitant to break out of my comfort zone and take the risk. But we went! And when we walked up to the trailhead, baby on my hip, daughters holding my hands, I knew pretty quickly that I had found my people. I'm an introvert who tends to be a bit socially anxious, but something was different there with those wild and free people.





Susan Cain says an introvert can talk for hours about something she's passionate about, and I am here to tell you it's true. These mamas talked about learning philosophies, living books, and preserving childhood just as much as I did. I quickly noticed the light in their eyes and the fire in their hearts. I felt an immediate bond with them that has only grown since that first day.

Our group meets every Monday at rotating parks, trailheads, and nature centers. Some weeks we hike, other weeks we have more focused nature studies. Every month or so, an invitation comes on Facebook for a mama book club at the local tea shop or an afternoon of kayaking at the lake. If one mom plans to attend a homeschool conference, she spreads the word and invites others along. As we continue to meet up regularly, I come home each time and add to my list of unique things I have noticed about Wild + Free families. Here are some of my favorites:

1. The parents and kids don't just enjoy nature, they also really know about nature and are always ready to discover more. One kid yells, "Whoa! A turquoise butterfly!" and five other kids run over to see. Another child spots a lizard with a blue tail scurrying into the bushes, and a mom chimes in that it's called a five-lined skink.

A few minutes later, my girls run over to me and ask if I want to come see an animal skeleton. When we get there, a small group has formed around the bones to discuss what kind of animal it might have been and how it might have died. Are those wings or legs? How long is its snout? What color is that piece of fur? I have never met a large group of people so ready to learn and so ready for adventure.





2. The children in our group are so kind to each other, no matter their ages. Older kids reach out their hands to help younger friends across slippery rocks. A toddler shares his snack with a three-year-old. A pack of girls both small and tall splash through the creek on a quest for sharks while another group creates a hideout in the thicket. Older sisters include younger brothers in their make-believe games. The children all seem to understand that there's enough open space and adventure to go around. No one feels the need to choose sides or leave anyone out.





3. Our Wild + Free group is as much a co-op of parents as it is of kids. At any given meetup you will find us asking each other questions about foreign language study, gushing about a book we love, or sharing advice about finding more ease in our homeschool days. On a recent hike, a new dear friend saw me struggling to keep my toddler comfortable in a sling. The next day she dropped off the baby pack her daughter had just outgrown--no strings attached, purely from her giving heart.

Another mama stopped and chatted with me one day when I felt the weight of homeschool heavy on my shoulders. She listened as I talked and then recommended the two things that have helped her find perspective and joy as a homeschool mother: a book (*Unschool*ed by Kerry McDonald) and an article (Sarah McKenzie's "Six Ways to Early Years You Won't Regret"). These women give with abundance and share without thought for themselves.

4. Wild + Free parents understand the importance of unstructured play. I hear mothers check in with their children at the beginning of nature group—deciding on a family meeting spot or a few ground rules—and then the children are allowed to run free. They are quickly off on expeditions or treasure hunts, gathering themselves into werewolf packs or groups of famous explorers. They find a clearing in the trees with a boulder in the center and claim it as the official Nature Kids' Fort. They climb rocks and find walking sticks. They rough house. And the parents let them.



More than anything, though, I come away from each weekly nature group with an overwhelming sense of calm and grounding. How is that possible in such a large group and with so many kids running about? These special families know their priorities. The parents and kids respect each other. No one is frantic or yelling. We are enriched by the outdoors and our learning from each other. We are living in the sunshine and drinking the wild air, as Emerson calls it, nourished by wonder and togetherness. I leave every week feeling invigorated for the week ahead. And that, as any homeschool parent knows, is no small thing.

Whether you are new to homeschooling or well underway, I urge you to seek community. Even if it means driving a little farther than you're used to or showing up without knowing anyone at all. You do not have to do this alone. There are other mamas out there who are a lot like you. They are waiting for you! Join a Wild + Free group; start a Wild + Free group. Take the time and effort to make it happen. Your mama heart will feel enriched and acknowledged, and you might just find the people you've been looking for all along.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Ford is a writer and list-maker who can usually be found with a stack of books beside her. She feels most at home among trees and large bodies of water and believes that time outdoors is never wasted time. Her thoughts revolve around the books she wants to read and what food she's going to eat next. A turning point in her life came when she realized she is an introvert and can live a life that fits her spirit. Claire currently lives in Kansas City with her husband and three children.





ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Lacey Jinks is a photographer and filmmaker in the Midwest specializing in birth, motherhood, and families. She lives in the Kansas City area with her husband, two daughters, and dog, Bosco. Lacey enjoys spending time hiking through fresh mountain air with her family, kayaking on the river, homeschooling, and loves reading a good book in a hammock. Lacey is very active in her church, a DIY enthusiast, yoga teacher, and bonafide crazy plant lady.