

NATURE GROUPS

BY KRISTIN ROGERS

A group of approximately 15 children of various ages are gathered on a sandy beach, posing for a photo. They are holding up a variety of large, colorful inflatable toys, including a pizza, a donut, a unicorn, a green frog, and a shark. The children are dressed in swimwear and summer clothes. In the background, a calm body of water reflects the sky, with a row of houses and palm trees along the shoreline. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is playful and summery.

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STARTING A NATURE GROUP

I am part of a nature group, which was formed by 10 other mothers who started homeschooling before me. They graciously welcomed me into the group when we started school. Between us, we have 28 children ranging from infant to 14 years old. One of the children named our group the “Wolf Pack” so obviously we got a logo drawn up and t-shirts made, which the kids thought was pretty cool. The vision for the group is to build a community of friends for both moms and children, together, experiencing hands-on nature and learning.

For me, there are two major benefits:

First, it provides social interactions with friends who range in age, personality, life experience, and ethnicity in a setting where my children will have thriving and caring relationships. This nature group is one way I provide my homeschooled children a wonderful social experience.

Second, I adore nature and believe it carries endless amounts of learning and enjoyment. We primarily follow a Charlotte Mason philosophy of education, which encourages nature study and nature journaling, so the day we set aside with our nature group fosters just that.



PLANNING OUR YEAR

We meet before each school year to plan our outings for the year. We live in Southern California so our options for great nature spots are limited. Through the years, we have narrowed down our favorites ones and place those in the schedule multiple times. We try to add in new places as we learn of them as well.

Our schedule always ends up needing to be adjusted because of circumstances, weather or something new we want to try instead. But we create a strong base schedule that night. We try to make it fun too, in order to kick off the beginning of the school year feeling celebratory. We held our last planning meeting in an olive oil shop where the owner gave us facts about oils and let us taste-test them. We had snacks, drinks and a lot of laughs.





CHOOSING OUR OUTINGS

We are a Charlotte Mason group so we all follow the same nature study schedule. For example, the theme for Summer and Fall was reptiles. Winter was rivers, brooks and oceans. And Spring was garden flowers and weeds. We keep this in mind when planning our outings and try to align our locations to compliment our term nature study if possible. We also keep the weather in mind and make sure we are choosing nature locations with shade or museums when it's hot.

Overall, one of the biggest things we look for in an outing is freedom for our children to have hands-on learning in nature. We stay away from locations where we have to stay on a trail or follow lots of rules. We love our children to be able to run free, built forts, have wooden sword fights, catch lizards, climb trees and experience nature up close and personal.



NATURE JOURNALING OUR TRIPS

We used to always nature journal together as a group but now some kids journal on nature days and some do it at home. My family does a mixture of both. The kids will pick out a few things in the field to put in their journal. They either take a sample or identify it in a field guide so they can draw it later, or we take a picture of it so they can refer back to the image later to draw it.



NATURE GROUP GATHERINGS

Our nature group is so important to us and offers so much value that we devote one full school day a week to it. We meet every Thursday around 11 AM and go until 3 or 4 PM depending on our adventure that day. Over the years, we've added some really neat things to our nature group days that I love:

1. Once a month we do recitations together. Each child will memorize a poem, Bible verse, piece of literature or a song and present it to the whole group.
2. Every season we do a book club together. One family chooses the book we will all read at home as a family and then we gather and celebrate that book. We dress-up, bring potluck-style food, and have the kids lead a conversation about the book.
3. We do term study presentations. After each nature study term, our children create a presentation to show the group. Some use drawings, poster board displays, props or just do a write up and read it before the group on the item they chose to emphasize.



A RECENT OUTING

On one particular outing, we chose a place where we could do our nature study presentations and then play in the water. We started the afternoon at tables where the kids gathered and listened to presentations. This last term study was on weeds and garden flowers.

(The older kids do their presentations independently and the little ones typically want their mom by their side for help and courage. The tiny ones might just hold up a flower and a picture they drew and tell us one neat fact they learned. The older kids give quite the lessons on what they chose to present, usually filled with great facts, stories and sometime witty humor.)

After all of the presentations were finished, we hiked up to where we could play in the creek flowing down the hills. Some of the kids hiked to the very top where they found a waterfall, and the rest of us hung out in a neat little area by the creek. In this area we saw Turkey Tail

mushrooms, a nest, giant water bug, water striders and the very cute California newt. The little guy was adorable, but his skin does produce a potent toxin that can be harmful if ingested. Only a few of us handled him and very carefully washed our hands afterward.

But the find of the day came when we were heading back down the trail, and I yelled, "SNAKE!" Right away one of the young boys named Conley said, "It's a mountain king snake, and I'm gonna catch it!" Sure enough, he caught that amazing colorful snake and showed it to the whole group.

It's very important that kids know what snakes are poisonous in your area. The bright colors concerned me, but he knew exactly what snake it was and that it was harmless. Conley was basically the nature day hero for catching the "coolest thing." After we all appreciated the snake a bit, he was let go and slithered happily away.



HOW TO START A NATURE GROUP

This group has been a treasure for my children and me. I value it greatly and would encourage any mom to find one and gather with other homeschool families if possible. There are so many ways to get online and connect with another family. You can even go to bewildandfree.org/groups and find people in your area.

If nothing is established, I would encourage you to be brave and start one. Ask another mom if she'd like to meet regularly for a nature walk and start there. Above all, pray that you would find a group that would be wonderful for your family. Share the desires of your heart and be patient for the provision.







ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love to laugh, learn, make fun of myself (there is much opportunity for this one), let my children climb on me, and join them in their homemade forts. I am not a “put together” girl. I often discover a rip in my dress a little too late, or get caught making up words when the correct ones fail me. My heart does a “pitter-patter” for nature, adoption, reading, coffee, homeschooling, thrift shops, messy hair and tattoos. I’m grateful for grace and the love of my husband and two daughters... and hugs. I’m grateful for hugs.

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