
Everyday Animals, or Why Not Kiss a Worm?

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Let's be chickadees. *Pshht, pshht, pshht*, we call as we sit on the frozen ground so close to one another that we can feel the cold spray of our neighbor's *pshht*. In the distance I had heard a few black-capped chickadees and gathered the group to try our luck at calling them closer. It worked. We sit talking to the chickadees, looking at them eye-to-eye, our breath mixing with their breath like some whispered secret.

It is a bone cold day in December, windy and gray, and I am surrounded by a tight little huddle of third graders. I look at their young faces, red cheeked and open mouthed. They are frozen, but not by the cold. Rather they are in the moment, just as I am. We have lost track of who we are, forgotten ourselves in an instant. Even our icy breath seems stilled. We have become chickadees.

All around us, perched and curious, are these small, sturdy birds. Some are so close we can see their bright inquisitive eyes staring right at us and hear their wings beat as they sail past our heads. We have called them in—or perhaps they have called us in. The line between us is fuzzy, the boundary unclear.

We've tried before to join our voices with the animals around the school. Crows never respond, blue jays scatter, and the

cicadas just sing over us. But this never stops us. The language we speak—whether chickadee, blue jay, cicada, or even owl—is really the language of hope. My third-grade students are filled with hope. They still live in the world of *Charlotte's Web*, where a pig can talk, a spider can spell, and a little girl named Fern can understand it all.

It lasts maybe five minutes, our conversation with the chickadees. While it's going on I'm in love with the world. It's a place where chickadees huddle around children huddled around children. We are all right here. When the spell is broken and the chickadees fly off, my students are quiet as though they have forgotten how to speak our human language. One little girl breaks the silence when she whispers, "Let's just be chickadees for the rest of our lives."

This idea of wanting to be *chickadees for the rest of our lives* is not really that farfetched in a child's world. They live in a world where bears fix steamy bowls of porridge, owls deliver the mail, and if you kiss the right frog, you might end up with a prince. Spend any amount of time with children, and you will find yourself talking about animals. It's a topic they have a lot of opinions about: who's their favorite animal, whether the peregrine falcon is actually faster than a cheetah, and who would

win if a shark and a crocodile had a fight. From the moment they are born, they are dressed in buntings covered with cute turtles, and each night they are tucked into bed under penguin blankets with tigers and giraffes as their cozy companions. Their world practically hums with animals.

But as our world becomes increasingly distanced from the natural world, children's direct experience and time with wild animals is in decline. According to a recent study conducted in Britain, children spend only half as much time outside as their parents did, with an average of less than one hour outside a day.¹ In the United States children under eight years old spend about two and a quarter hours a day with a screen, while tweens and teens spend respectively six and nine hours a day plugged in.² All this time spent looking at and engaging with screens means less and less time doing other things, like being outside. As Richard Louv points out in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, as this generation of children stay plugged in to their screens, they become unplugged from the natural world, leading to an increasing trend toward childhood obesity, depression, and attention disorders.³ Our children are becoming savvy digital natives, but at what cost? What are the consequences of a generation of children who haven't tried their hand at catching a frog, raising a monarch caterpillar to watch it become a butterfly, or stopping to listen to the crickets sing?

WHY ANIMALS ARE IMPORTANT

Think back to your own childhood. Perhaps you remember catching fireflies, or chasing a butterfly, or even holding a frog in your own hands. These moments are often touchstone memories. Encounters and interactions with animals play a powerful and fundamental role in a child's life. Moments when a child is kneeling down next to an anthill intently watching the ants coming and going or carefully reaching out to feel the fuzzy back of a woolly bear caterpillar are the moments when the child is making connections, understanding how he or she is alike and different from the other living creatures. At such moments, a child is building a sense of self, while at the same time developing a personal relationship with the animal world. The times when a child is directly engaged with another animal are the tangibles of the intangible, revealing to a child what it means to be alive in this world.

The animals don't need to be big and in fact might not fit our adult definition of what is actually even *wild*. Instead, as parents, teachers, caregivers, and community members, let's remind ourselves that a bumblebee, a daddy long legs, or a toad is just as wild as a tiger or a humpbacked whale. The small



everyday creatures that we encounter in our immediate world are untamed and distinct in their own wild way. For very young children, their first direct experience with a ladybug—feeling it crawl across their hands—is immediate, concrete, and stimulating. I'm an advocate for these small backyard creatures who share their everyday world with us that our children can have direct experiences with. These wild animals are the unsung teachers of our children. Through them, children learn some of life's most basic and elemental lessons; all living things are born, and all living things die. It doesn't really get much simpler than that, but it is the dead snake in the road that offers the lesson or the nest of baby robins that gives us hope again. And in between this cycle of life, these everyday animals suggest a million more lessons when we invite our children to have these experiences.

I think of the times I've brought small red wiggler worms into second grade classrooms. The students can hardly wait to touch the worms. I hear them squeal and laugh with the excitement of holding another living creature. They notice how worms move and that worms respond to being gently sprayed with cool water. They watch the worms seek the dark cover of the leaves and observe the way the worm actually looks. They fall in love with the worms, some even wanting to kiss them. Children have no boundaries when interacting with these touchable, approachable wild things. As I watch this, I have noticed that children's inclination to connect with animals is exuberant. We are, after all, animals ourselves, and when given

a chance, children celebrate the realization that we are indeed kin—so why not kiss a worm?

According to biologist E.O. Wilson's *biophilia hypothesis*, this predisposition humans have toward all things animal is completely natural.⁴ It's part of our evolutionary legacy, since as omnivores, humans had to depend on plants and animals; we are hardwired to be intimately focused on them. Our survival once depended on it, so we have carried this connection and interest in other living creatures with us into our modern everyday lives. Biophilia suggests that children enter this world with a vital affinity toward all living things. Whether it is a worm or an eagle, children want to and need to connect with their extended family of living creatures.

In his own memoir, *Naturalist*, Wilson recalls the summer he was seven and stayed along a Florida beach called Paradise Point. His days were unstructured and full of wandering, exploration, and encounters with jellyfish, manta rays, and toadfish. He writes:

A child comes to the edge of deep water with a mind prepared for wonder. He is like a primitive adult of long ago, an acquisitive early Homo arriving at the shore of Lake Malawi, say, or the Mozambique Channel. The experience must have been repeated countless times over thousands of generations and it was richly rewarded.⁵

Wilson draws his experience back through time. From his adult vantage point, he sees this summer as seminal. It travels with him as “a talisman, transmitting a powerful energy that directs the growth of experience and knowledge.”⁶ Our encounters with animals as a child go deep into our hearts and mind. They open us up to wonder and curiosity, informing us that we stand in relationship with the other living beings on this planet. As a child, we can experience each encounter as personal, a connection that has the power to stay with us for the remainder of our lives.

This curiosity—this bend toward all things animal—is a spark for children and often a pathway into learning. I think of my middle son who hadn't shown much interest in reading by the middle of first grade, until one day he rolled over a log and found a very small, newly hatched garter snake. It was perfectly sized for his small hands. He held the sleek snake carefully as it slipped in and out of his fingers. Before discovering it, he didn't see reading on his own as necessary. This chance encounter woke an insatiable curiosity that sent him directly to any book he could find on snakes and fed his desire to keep looking under logs.

My son's experience is not unique. Interest in and curiosity about animals prompt children to ask questions, to wonder, and to develop their scientific and analytical thinking skills. The famous primatologist and author, Jane Goodall, had her very first experience in studying animals at the tender age of four. She spent a whole day hidden in her family's chicken coop because she had become immensely curious about how chickens laid their eggs. She waited with the patience of the true field biologist she would later become until she actually saw one of the chickens lay an egg.⁷



As Jane Goodall's story points out, time with domestic animals can play an essential role in a child's life. Many studies reveal that children who grow up with pets develop attitudes of compassion and an understanding of humane treatment of animals. These studies suggest that living with an animal companion significantly contributes to a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. When children are given the jobs of caring for their pets, such as feeding, walking, or grooming, their feelings of attachment are deepened. Furthermore, this attachment to pets in childhood predicts positive and caring behavior toward animals in adulthood.⁸ When talking about who is part of their family, children often include their pet. When asked to describe who is important to them, they mention the dogs, cats, and other domestic animals that share their home ground.⁹ Children view family and neighborhood pets as important figures in their world and experience relationships with these animals as friends and kin.

There has been less research into how time with wild animals impacts a child's development. But the research that has been conducted suggests that when children have these experiences,

they develop attitudes of affection and interest in animals and the natural world that they then carry forward with them into adulthood. These studies are compelling and demonstrate that children who spend time engaged in direct experiences with wild animals learn to care about the natural world and its inhabitants.¹⁰ They suggest that if we care about biodiversity and the natural world, we need to make sure we are providing plenty of opportunities throughout children's lives to interact with the animals around them. In a world where we spend more and more time at younger and younger ages interacting with screens, this should remind us all that putting the screens away and getting ourselves and our children outside for everyday encounters with local wild animals is essential to how our children care for this planet in the future.



The *extinction of experience*, a phrase coined by the lepidopterist and author Robert Michael Pyle, proposes that people—in particular, children—are becoming more and more alienated and separated from the natural world.¹¹ This loss of connection, as it turns out, is not healthy for us. We actually thrive when out in nature, our blood pressure drops, our stress hormones are

reduced, we are more physically active, and we report a more positive sense of well-being.¹² This seems to be true for people of all ages. Being outside is good for humans, but it is also good for the natural world. Without time outside in the natural world, forming attachment and relationships with the animals that share our world, we are losing the thread that binds us together. How can we expect children to care about something if they have never had any experience with it? Robert Michael Pyle asks, “What is the extinction of a condor to a child who has never seen a wren?”¹³ Hands-on, direct experiences with animals are not just nice things to have in your children's lives, they are part of our human blueprint, our required reading, not only for their health but for the health of this planet.

Time with animals—from everyday experiences with the small creatures like chickens and snakes who share our home ground to chance encounters with wild things like jellyfish and manta rays—is an invitation for children to grow compassion, develop curiosity, and see themselves as connected to all the other living things in this world that we share.

THESE ARE THE CREATURES IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

When I was a child growing up in Brooklyn, I had *the sliver*, a wedge between my garage and my next door neighbor's brick wall. It was my gateway, my own chipmunk hole, a place to disappear into. It really was a sliver. I couldn't even turn around in it or sit down while I was there. But I spent hours in this canyon, searching and learning all the cracks and crevices of this small world. I found such treasures as swirled snails that would peek out their heads when I hummed to them and daredevil earthworms that scaled brick walls. I noticed things like new spider webs and chestnuts that had been chewed by small mice. I became versed in the ways of ants and fluent in the language of starlings. This sliver was my special place and like many children, these special places are the formative landscape of unstructured exploration.

For many children, what can make a place special is what happens there. The place doesn't need to be big at all, and in fact it usually is perfectly child-sized, like a den in a hedgerow or a sliver between two garages. It isn't what any adult would find beautiful or even purely natural. These are the thickets and rambles of neighborhoods and backyards, undefined scruff. Rural, suburban, or urban, it doesn't matter, for children will find a place and make it their own. These spots are often the unmanicured places parents and communities want to clean up. But leave them, because for a child they are just as Robert Michael Pyle describes them: “rich with possibility.”¹⁴



So often, places become special to a child because of her encounters with the creatures that share them. Ants, beetles, inchworms, the squirrel that leaves a chewed-up acorn—these are the child’s neighbors. And just as we might form friendships, have casual conversations with, or quietly spy on our human neighbors, children are doing this with animals in these places. This is important work—this quiet, untethered time with animals. It is good to remind yourself that knowing animals is different than knowing about animals. A child has no sense of urgency to know what kind of caterpillar he is holding, or what species of bird she is hearing, or whether the butterfly he follows from flower to flower is endangered. That is an adult’s agenda.

Children approach each animal as an individual, in just the way they might meet a librarian or a mail-carrier or a new friend on the playground. Children need a chance to know the animals in their neighborhood before they can understand the how we are all part of a complex ecosystem. Children need time to form these connections. A child’s world view is all inclusive; both people and animals hold the possibility of friendship.

SKIN TO SKIN

I have three children. The elder two are eleven and nine years older, respectively, than my youngest. When I gave birth to my youngest, there had been a shift in how the hospital brought my newborn to me. Instead of whisking my infant away to be cleaned, diapered, and swaddled, my moments-old son was placed directly against me, our skin touching, keeping the physical bond that we had experienced for the last nine months intact. *Skin-to-skin* was how we lived for the first few critical hours and the following forty-eight hours of his life as well. New research had informed the hospital to adopt this policy. Skin-to-skin contact in at least the first hour after birth is clinically proven to increase the attachment between mother and newborn while reducing their stress and helping the newborn transition to post-natal life.¹⁵

It wasn’t just about our skin touching; while my son and I snuggled, our other senses were forming connections. He was hearing my heart beat—the sound that had been the constant of his in utero development—and he was learning my smell, so that at only weeks old, he would be able to differentiate me from all other mothers. And I was falling in love, learning every inch of him, noticing the beauty mark in the swirl of his ear and the sweet sounds he made as he nursed.

I keep thinking about this idea of skin-to-skin contact and the formation of attachment. What if we extend this idea to children and their experiences with animals? What if children need time throughout their lives to have multi-sensory direct experiences with animals to form attachments to the natural world? Even the very young will reach out toward the living. They will stop in their tracks as a ladybug crawls across the ground and stretch their chubby fingers to touch it. It isn't just their sense of touch that is engaged; all their senses are involved, and connections are made. Each time they have a direct experience with an animal, synapses are being formed.

We can't depend on our ancient connection to the living. We must actively cultivate experiences and opportunities with the natural world. Our children need this in their lives. They need time with chipmunks and chickadees, fireflies and snails, even spiders and snakes. This is all part of their birthright and essential to forming attachments to the living Earth. Without these experiences, there is a great loss. Children should know how it feels to hold a frog in your hand, feeling its soft and tender body before letting it free. And for the animals, there is loss, too. Without these experiences with us, there is very little hope we will consider them in the future.



Photo Credits: Susie Spikol and Ben Conant

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NOTES

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