

North Florida  
**SCHOOL DAYS**  
Nov / Dec 2012



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# NORTH FLORIDA SCHOOL DAYS

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## SPORTS AND RECREATION

### Getting Children To Experience The Great Outdoors

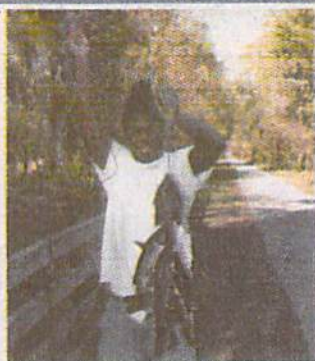
By Annie Hermansen-Báez, U.S. Forest Service – Southern Research Station

Childhood obesity now affects one third of American children. Obesity rates have tripled in the past 30 years and for the first time in our history, American children may face a shorter expected lifespan than their parents. Not surprisingly, the rate in obesity has also coincided with a rise in childhood illnesses, such as Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and depression.

Organized sports are often touted as the answer to keeping kids healthy and active. But consider this: the obesity epidemic coincides with the greatest increase in organized children's sports in history. What are kids missing that organized sports, including soccer and Little League, can't provide?

One answer is free, unstructured time outdoors. The American Academy of Pediatrics describes child free play as not only critical for physical, cognitive, and social development, but also as an ideal way for parents to strengthen family bonds and to serve as role models for their children.

But you might ask how do we find the time to get outdoors? One way to reclaim time is to examine your family's time spent connected to electronic devices. We now live in a world so plugged in to devices, sitting mere feet apart but tuned into anything but each other. At home, at work, even in transit, we are filling every empty space – yes, our lives are full. But are they fulfilling?



The National Wildlife Federation's "Be Out There" campaign recommends that parents give their kids a "Green Hour" every day. Some tips for how to reclaim time outdoors and spend more family time together include:

- Examine your own media use.
- Draw clear lines between the different demands on your time.
- Make outdoor time a priority, and part of your family routine.
- Play. Laugh. Repeat.
- Be patient with your children

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and with yourself.

As the summer heat subsides and the beautiful fall weather begins (finally!), spending time outdoors is becoming more and more enticing. The outdoors beckons you to take that first step and it's easier than you might think. Follow some of these easy tips for getting your family outdoors, both in your own backyard and beyond!

### In Your Own Backyard

There are many things you can do as a family right in your own backyard that are simple and do not involve a lot of time or expense.

**Take a time out.** Simply spending time outdoors doing things we normally do indoors is a great way to spend time outside. Throw a blanket on the grass and read to your child. Eat meals outdoors.

**Take the toys outdoors.** Play hopscotch or outdoor hide-and-seek!

**Watch birds.** Bird-watching is an increasingly popular hobby, requires no expertise to begin, and fosters attentiveness and patience in children. Planting native shrubs, trees, and other plants that provide food and shelter can attract birds to your backyard. You can also make or purchase a bird feeder and put up a bird bath in a place you can easily view the birds. Creating and keeping a bird journal is a great way to hone observation skills while enjoying the birds in your neighborhood or at your own family's feeders. Visit <http://nwf.org/backyard> for more tips on how to make your backyard more bird friendly. The National Audubon Society's website has a lot of information and resources; at: [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org) and the Alachua County Audubon Society's website has local birding information [www.flmnh.ufl.edu/aud/](http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/aud/).

**Invite butterflies.** Laying out the welcome mat for butterflies is a fun



family project. Create a butterfly garden to invite butterflies to your backyard. Choose a warm, sunny spot to plant your garden. Fill your garden with fragrant, brightly colored blooms, especially purple, red, pink, orange, and yellow ones. Choose native plants whenever possible since these plants provide butterflies with the nectar or foliage they need as adults and caterpillars. For more tips on how to create your own butterfly garden, visit: [www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Gardening-Tips/How-to-Attract-Butterflies-to-Your-Garden.aspx](http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Gardening-Tips/How-to-Attract-Butterflies-to-Your-Garden.aspx). You can also visit our very own Florida Museum of Natural History Wildflowers & Butterflies website to search for informa-

tion about common wildflowers and butterflies in our area, where wildflowers grow, and other resources at: [www.flmnh.ufl.edu/wildflower](http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/wildflower).

**Pitch a tent.** Arrange a backyard campout with your children by setting up a tent in your backyard or on your patio. Listen to and discuss all of the sounds that your hear, such as crickets, frogs, owls, possums, and other small creatures. Talk about why some animals are awake at night instead of during the day. The National Wildlife Federation sponsors the Great American Backyard Campout every June to encourage families to get outdoors and camp in their own backyards ([www.backyardcampout.org](http://www.backyardcampout.org)).

**Seek hidden treasures.** This activity is simple and can be adapted to the season, the loca-

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tion, and the age of the participants. Scavenger hunts allow families the opportunity to explore outdoor spaces together and encourage children to gather and interpret information about the world around them for themselves. There are just a few things that you need: (1) an outdoor place to explore; (2) notepads and pencils; and (3) small reusable bags and containers. All you need to do to get started is: (1) provide each child with a collection bag or container; and (2) create a scavenger hunt list of nature items, appropriate for the season and location, for participants to find. The list could include leaves, twigs, cones, stems, buds, shells, flowers, seeds, bark, and more.

### Beyond the Backyard

Here in Gainesville we are lucky to have an abundance of parks and

green spaces within and in close proximity to our city, making it easy to get outdoors and enjoy time with your family.

**Take a hike.** Put on some comfortable clothes, apply some sunscreen, grab a water bottle, hat, sunglasses, and a snack or two (always a good idea with kids!), and head out the door to one of our awesome local parks, such as Cofrin Nature Park, Loblolly Woods Nature Park, or Alfred A. Ring Park. Alternatively, take an evening stroll around your own neighborhood. You can also hike and seek, which is a combination of a nature hike and a scavenger hunt ([www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Hike-And-Seek.aspx](http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Hike-And-Seek.aspx)).

**Pedal to health.** There are

plenty of great places to go biking with your children here in the Gainesville area. Before you leave, be sure that everyone has a helmet and plenty of water. Long trousers and shirts with long sleeves are recommended to help protect tender arms and legs from potential falls. The Gainesville-Hawthorne Rail Trail is a great place to bike with children since it is traffic free and portions of it are paved. The San Felasco Hammock Preserve and Paynes Prairie Preserve state parks have multiple trails that are great for off-road biking.

**Get hooked on fishing.** Fishing is a great way to teach kids about wildlife and for parents and children to spend quality time together. All you need is a hook, line, sinker, and a bobber. Stick with an ultra-light rod and reel so kids can feel the fish bite more easily. For really young children consider using a simple cane pole without the reel so kids don't have to cast. Go where the fish are to keep kids from getting bored! Some great places to take kids fishing in the Gainesville area include Orange Lake, Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Lake Lochloosa, and Newnans Lake. Though about an hour's drive,

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Cedar Key is a fabulous place to spend the day fishing with your family by the Gulf of Mexico. Fishing for Success is a University of Florida IFAS Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences program that uses fishing and other related activities to "hook" children of all ages into various aspects of fisheries through a combination of tours, demonstrations, and community fishing events, such as Family Fishing Days. For more information visit: <http://lakewatch.ifas.ufl.edu/FishSUCCESS/>.

**Go batty!** A truly unique outdoor family activity in Gainesville is bat watching at the University of Florida's Bat House and Bat Barn, located on campus across from Lake Alice. At dusk an estimated 300,000 Brazilian free-tailed bats and Southeastern bats stream out of the specially constructed bat houses right over the heads of the amazed spectators that gather nearby to marvel at this wonder of nature. Each night the bats in this one colony eat about 2.5 billion insects! Now that's what I call free pest control! Come out and enjoy this amazing event! Visit [www.flmnh.ufl.edu/bats/](http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/bats/) for more information.

Some more great sources of information about what families can do outdoors with their children include the U.S Forest Service's DiscovertheForest.org website, the National Wildlife Federation's Get Outside website ([www.nwf.org/Get-Outside.aspx](http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside.aspx)) NatureRocks.org website, the



NationalGetOutdoorsDay.org website, and the Let's Move Outside website (<http://www.letsmove.gov/lets-move-outside>).

For more information contact

Annie Hermansen-Báez, U.S. Forest Service, [www.interfacesouth.org/projects/kids-in-the-woods](http://www.interfacesouth.org/projects/kids-in-the-woods), or call 352-376-3271, [ahermansen@fs.fed.us](mailto:ahermansen@fs.fed.us).



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