

HAPPY KIDS, PEACEFUL PARENTS: How Nature Can Bring God, Parent and Child Together.

By: Mary Lambrecht, M.S. LMFT

A 12 year-old girl sat tall while water licked her canoe paddle; later she laughed when fireflies magically danced and disappeared. In riding that river and in keeping watch over fireflies, this girl seemed unaware of her chronic disease or her own shyness and social struggles. As one of the camp counselors overseeing this group, I knew risks were high for this dear one. Because she periodically needed medication and extra care, other children were challenged to rise above fleshly temptations to judge and exclude her, and move to a new understanding of equal human worth and value. God used this canoe trip as a turning point of new joy and freedom for this young girl struggling with epilepsy and low self-esteem.

Chapters 40-66 in Isaiah also depict a turning point for the people of Israel. Their captivity is over and God assures them of His comfort. Isaiah uses many metaphors from nature to describe both the tenderness of God and the power of God, in bringing freedom to His people. Ways that God's tenderness and power in nature, are shown in His Word, can serve as encouragement to parents desiring more togetherness with their children. How deeply God knows us! In walking through a nature preserve together, it becomes easier for a mom and her 10 year-old daughter to laugh; stresses decrease, and unknowingly they are joining with how "the trees of the woods rejoice before the Lord" (Psalm 96:12). While dad and his son put names to galaxies around a campfire, it is somehow less awkward for the boy to share his confusion around sexual temptation. Dad encourages and gives guidance, because intuitively Dad knows that God will make the crooked places straight for his son, and the rough places smooth (Isaiah 40:3).

God wants to set the captive free. Captivity can be horses of different colors, so to speak. Blocked communication between adolescent and parent, a stressed parent and a highly energetic two year-old, and teenagers battling peer group influence are examples of parent/child captivity. However, if God knows "every bird in the mountains" (Psalm 50:11) surely He knows the anxieties of parenting. Following are a few ideas that might inspire you to bring nature into parenting:

For younger children: Outside scavenger hunts, children planting their own garden, trips to zoos, apple orchards and parks, "biggest leaf-pile" contest, night-games such as flashlight tag, building a bird-feeder or birdhouse, sledding, skiing.

For older children: Planned camping, hiking, canoeing, skiing, and even dog-sledding trips, parent-child retreats (self-organized or through a church), foreign or domestic mission trips, community outreach projects such as "Habitat for Humanity."

While enjoying God's great outdoors with your child, give a hug to that gangly teenager. Scoop up that bouncy little one. Draw them close. For God "gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them in the fold of His garment" (Is. 40:11). Loving touch is another way God unites parent and child. He tends His flock like a shepherd, whether that be a girl forgetting for one day her epilepsy and social rejection, or you and your six year-old jumping in leaf piles.

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P.O. Box 1676, Appleton, WI 54912 (920) 720-8920

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