

# wondering

The outdoors is where imagination and discovery collide in the most spectacular fashion. Mother Nature's secrets are just begging to be discovered and, what's more, she is a brilliant, patient teacher and your child a willing student. Everything outdoors is full of wonder.

A couple of feathers stuck in their hair and your child is instantly Geronimo or Pocahontas. Long clusters of berries make beautiful earrings, an agapanthus stem turns into the ultimate sword and a cicada skin creates the perfect brooch. Nearly every object found outside can become something special as Mother Nature offers the most fantastic props box from which to draw.

Encourage your child to find the extraordinary in the ordinary, the magic in the mundane and enchantment in the everyday. Here are some ideas on how to go about this.



## Whizzing clouds

On a warm lazy day, we like nothing better than heading outside, lying on the grass and watching the clouds go by. Every shape and object is up there, and watching and describing them can encourage stillness, independent thought and imagination. Older children can be encouraged to name the cloud types – cirrus, cumulus, nimbus, and so on. They might even want to do some further research when you head home.

Just the other day my son saw a perfect heart scudding across the sky, so I encourage you to head outdoors when you can and see what you and your child can find.

## Fairy rescue

Set the scene for young children by suggesting that you have seen a few sad fairies lurking around the garden. Perhaps a bird stole their home? Or a nasty lizard blundered through it, leaving it in tatters? Or, horror of horrors, Dad may have mown over it last weekend! Encourage them to build a new home and place it in a quiet spot in the garden.

Your children can find all the necessary equipment themselves, with you offering a suggestion on decor every now and then, or when invited.

In the past, my children have used moss, lichen, dandelion-seed clusters, dainty flowers and cut grass to great effect. Occasionally, they have chosen items from inside, such as bread, dog biscuits, sultanas, grape tomatoes and bits of carrot.

This is a wonderful way for children of all ages to spend an afternoon – and it encourages imagination, compassion and sharing.



### **Dastardly dandelions**

Another simple game of make-believe is to encourage children to pick and blow dandelion-seed clusters into the air.

With just a little prompting, children will quickly come to know that they are really releasing a million trapped fairies from the evil clutches of the dastardly dandelion and will be granted a wish in return. My daughter, now 13, still delights in playing this game.

## *High Tea*



Take a visit to the two-dollar shop and buy a child's tea set, or head to the local charity store and purchase some old-fashioned teacups and saucers. Present them to your children with an old tablecloth, some paper serviettes and water in a drink bottle (or squeeze dispenser for young children). Or you can simply encourage them to run to and from the garden tap, filling their cups.

Their imaginations are likely to run wild from here, or you might like to set the scene for them – you could suggest that they invite the Queen of the Fairies or the King of the Trolls (who can be very polite if asked nicely) for high tea. Fairies, of course, don't eat human food, so your children will need to collect what they believe is appropriate fare. Now retreat and let their imaginations take hold. If you don't receive an invitation to the party, celebrate your children's independence.

## Weather watching

Experiencing the weather in all its forms can be fun! From windy days, when everything seems to hang on for dear life, to impossibly hot and sunny days, or wild storms that encourage you to batten down the hatches and sit at the window watching, there's something for everyone (see 'Storm watch' on page 25).

There's still huge excitement in our home when a rainbow splashes across the sky. Little children will love counting and naming the colours and then setting off to get to the end of it. Older children can be encouraged to think about why rainbows form and which atmospheric conditions need to occur before they can. And, of course, everyone should be encouraged to draw or make their own version of a rainbow after returning from trying to find that elusive pot of gold.

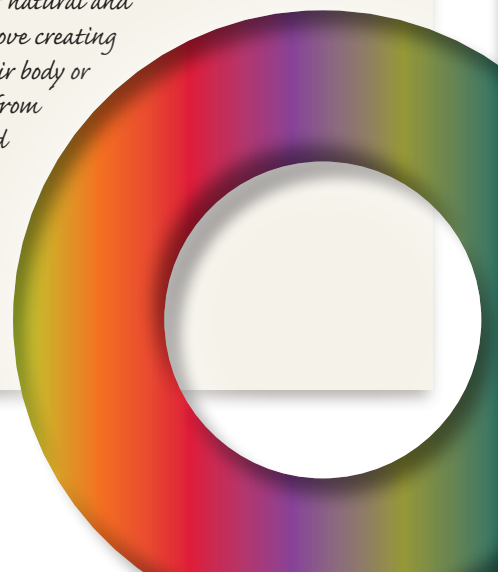
Windy days are also magic. Flying a kite is fun. Or head to a park and encourage your children to imagine themselves as leaves being blown about. Join in with them as they run, yell and roll about, trying to catch the wind. Take some bubble blowers for the full effect – it's exhilarating!



## sparkly shadows

*Reflected light fascinates children. My daughter still loves taking a reflective object (sparkly necklace, tin foil or a small mirror) outdoors on a sunny day and finding a spot where she can make it reflect a myriad of tiny rainbows or prisms onto a wall or the ground. She also infuriates our dog by reflecting the light onto the floor and laughing madly as he tries to catch it with his paws. Older children can be encouraged to consider how sunlight can be refracted and why it reflects the way it does.*

*On the whole, children are also fascinated by the amazing array of shadows cast by both our natural and built environments. They love creating shadow puppets (using their body or whatever else is to hand), from the simple bunny (clenched fist with two fingers protruding) through to amazing critters limited only by their imagination.*



## Rainbow sandwich

DIFFICULTY **1** MESS FACTOR **2** PREP TIME **5 MINS** COOKING TIME **N/A** FEEDS **2**

4 slices of soft, awesomely fresh, preservative-free white bread

1 large carrot, grated

1 large stick of celery, sliced thinly

1 Lebanese cucumber, washed, thinly sliced

Half a raw beetroot, peeled and grated

Raspberry jam

Peanut butter

A few lettuce leaves, washed and roughly torn

Your child can help with nearly every aspect of this delightful sandwich packed with colour, texture and taste. I'm yet to find a child who won't wolf it down in two or three bites.

### Method

Spread two pieces of bread with a layer of peanut butter. Spread the other two with a layer of raspberry jam. Sprinkle all the other ingredients evenly on top of these layers. Squish the slices of bread together, cut into four and enjoy.

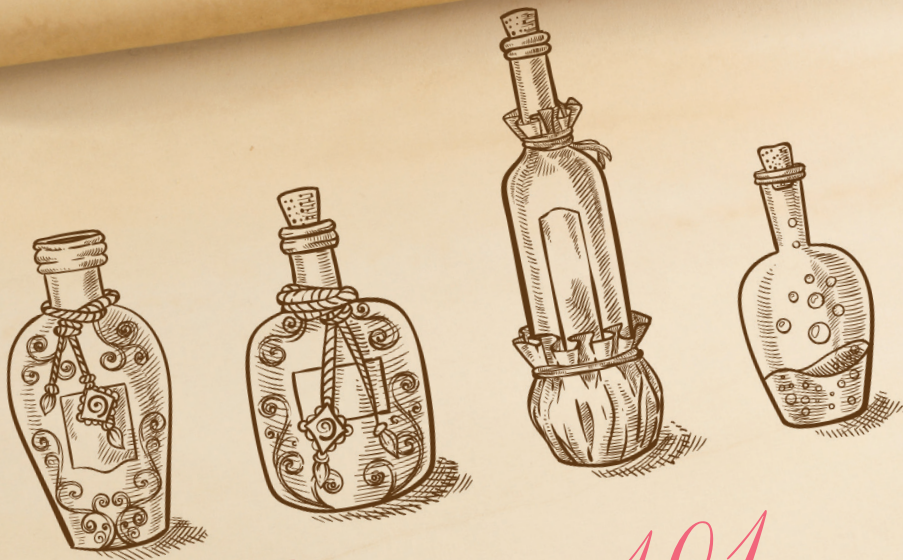
If your child is nut intolerant, forego the peanut butter, or replace it with a little bit of tahini. Or if you don't want to make a sandwich, consider a rainbow salad!

## Make-believe houses

Children enjoy creating rooms, or even a whole house, if they have a little space outdoors. This can be as simple as stepping out an imaginary floor plan and then outlining it with sticks or long leaves. They then choose their favourite room and collect things to decorate it, perhaps their pillow and a blanket for a bedroom or several saucepans, cups and a few bits of cutlery for a kitchen.

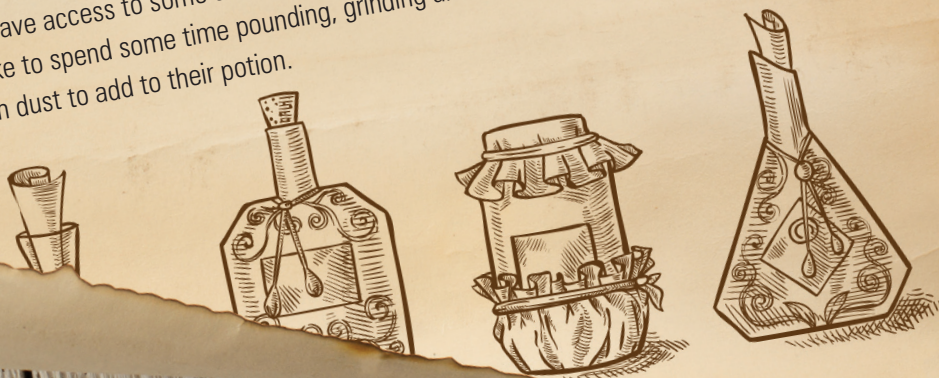
Shops are also big favourites. Everything in the outdoors can be sold, and gumnuts or other funky seedpods can be used for currency! Relying only on their beautiful imaginations, this is a great way to spend an afternoon.





## Potions 101

If you have a budding Harry Potter or Hermione Granger in the family, magical potions will be concocted at some stage. With nothing more than a container or two, some water and whatever is within reach, children can dream up some truly awesome (and awful) potions. Think soil, dog biscuits, washing up liquid, leaves, flowers, sultanas, food dye. Children delight in selecting the ingredients and pouring them from container to container. Even if your child has never heard of Harry Potter, this sensory, unstructured play, with its mix of touching, pouring, collecting, earthy smells and murky colours, thrills young children. If you have access to some soft stone (sandstone, chalk, limestone, etc.), your older children may like to spend some time pounding, grinding and smashing it to produce perfect fairy or dragon dust to add to their potion.



## Junior DETECTIVES

Kids are natural explorers. Whether they are dragon slayers on a mission to rescue the family pet (who you may subsequently find tied to the clothesline) or budding scientists on the trail of a magical creature is entirely up to them.

With little or no input from you, they are likely to create the most fantastic scenarios and a whole other world into which they will (for a period of time) fully immerse themselves.

Magical creatures might be elusive, but your children (with no need for costumes other than what they can find in the garden) will be certain of their existence and are likely to want to continue 'hunting for signs' again and again.

After bedtime, you could add to the set by placing some mysterious objects around the garden: large white pebbles (dragon poo), a few snapped branches or stomped-upon plants (proof of magical creatures), glitter (indicating elusive fairies) can all add to the theatre.



## back-to-front day

A fun activity for kids of any age is to hold a back-to-front day. Simply muddle up a typical day by changing the order of things. It's sure to spark your child's imagination and promote discussion on why we do things the way we do. For example, you might like to start your day with dinner. Then have a bath but stay in your pyjamas. If you're brave enough, take the family pet for a walk in your PJs. Have breakfast for lunch and then lunch for dinner. It's bound to confuse everyone, but it's great fun and will fill your day with laughter.



## Make-believe in the kitchen

Most kids love to get into the kitchen and it's important that they do, as they will learn some important life skills, not least of which is to begin understanding where foods actually come from. And kids love playing grown-ups, so I guarantee they will adore being given the opportunity to cook something for you.

Why not encourage your children to set up their own restaurant or outdoor café? Depending on their age, it can be an entirely imaginary meal, but the table can still be set, things can be cooked on an imaginary stovetop and culinary delights served. For older kids you might want to help them devise an age-specific menu and let them get on with it. They could cook a simple meal for the entire family. Some pan-fried sausages with mashed potatoes and greens on the side would be a great start. Encourage them to do some baking too. If they are a little unsure about baking a cake from scratch, there are some great packet cakes available nowadays which make the process much easier.



## Grandma's simplicity chocolate cake

DIFFICULTY 1 MESS FACTOR 3 PREP TIME 15 MINS COOKING TIME 25 MINS FEEDS 6-10 DEPENDING ON SLICE THICKNESS

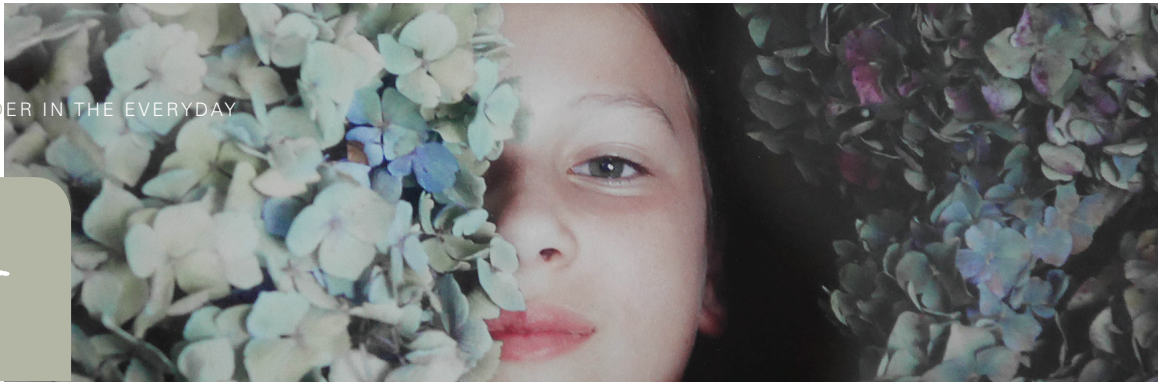
1 cup self-raising flour  
2 heaped tbsp of cocoa powder  
½ cup white sugar (raw sugar will intensify the flavour)  
80 g butter  
½ cup full-cream milk  
2 eggs

A good friend shared this recipe with my daughter a couple of years ago. Aptly named because it is easy for children to master, it's now a regular in my daughter's baking armoury. It is a perfect cake for a kids' afternoon tea and is also a great addition to a picnic lunch. Your children will gobble this cake up in no time! Children under 5 can be your eager helpers; children 6+ can have a go at this recipe by themselves.

### Method

Preheat your oven to 180°C. Put all the ingredients into a mixing bowl. Using a wooden spoon (there is no need to use a blender), stir until the ingredients are well combined. Transfer to a lightly greased cake tin and bake in the oven for 20 minutes or so. The cake doesn't really need icing; instead, sprinkle over some icing sugar and serve while still warm.

# finding



A young child's environment is both vast and intimate. For very young children, understanding the environment beyond their own little patch of outdoors, and the creatures that inhabit it, is impossible to grasp. However, as they develop, children will begin to see themselves as part of something bigger and will be eager to learn and discover more about the big wide world and themselves.

Below are lots of activities that will encourage your children to develop curiosity about the world around them.

## *Why does it do that?*

Asking your child lots of questions about the outdoors can greatly assist their journey of discovery. For example, you might ask:

*Why do you think we have plants?*

*Why are there so many different animals?*

*Why do you think we have soil?*

*Why do you think the sun is hot?*

*Why does the wind blow the way it does?*

*Why do you think we have fire/air/water?*

*Why do you think there are insects?*

No answer is wrong, but certainly each one will help your child begin conceptualising the environment and their place in it.

The flow-on effect of these discussions is that children will also unknowingly absorb messages about independence, resilience and compassion. Older children might want to head to the computer to research these concepts in more detail.



## Garden chaos

This is a completely crazy activity to consider if you are trying to create order in your garden. But you know what? It is so much fun for children of any age that I think the resulting chaos is well worth it.

Together, visit your local garden centre and randomly choose six seed packets. Encourage your child to choose plants that appear to be completely different from one another in size, colour, structure and shape.

To avoid disappointment, try and make sure that at least a couple of the plants your child chooses will actually grow (that is, the plants are suited to the space and season you have chosen for this activity).

On the whole, nasturtiums, beans, sunflowers, pumpkins, zucchini, tomatoes, marigolds, violas (pansies), Cosmos, Gaura, parsley, chives, rocket, kale, rainbow chard and spinach are all good options.

Once at home, find a clear space in the garden. Open the

seed packets, tip them into a bowl and mix with a little coarse sand if you have some to hand. Then, standing together with your back facing the garden bed, toss the seed mix over your shoulder. Rake over lightly and keep well watered for the first couple of weeks.

The result – who knows? Some weeks later, plants could spring up sporadically (or not at all), or you may get a wild profusion of seriously odd-looking plants competing for space all at once.

This activity encourages patience and will hopefully provide a visual and, in some cases, culinary delight for you and your children.

## Water, water everywhere

Water is one of the four basic elements of our world (if you believe ancient philosophers and astrologers). Certainly, along with air, fire and earth, water is essential to life.

Talking about different forms of water and explaining its role in sustaining life is not as difficult as you might think. Find a variety of simple containers, old PVC pipes, a hose and a watering can and you can create lakes, waterfalls, oceans (add a little salt), rivers, ponds, rain, puddles and even a beach (collect some sand and seaweed for the full effect). Encourage older children to find out what constitutes water, why it evaporates, where it goes, when and why we drink it and how plants use it.



## Rain, rain, come any day!

Not only is this activity really good fun, but making a rain gauge can be a starting point for discussion about the need to conserve water. To make one, you will need:

- a large PET plastic bottle cut in half
- a few large, thick rubber bands
- a big sturdy straight stick
- a ruler
- a permanent marker.

Mark intervals in millimetres (or the measurement of your choice) on the side of the bottle or simply attach

a ruler to the bottle with a rubber band. Then attach the bottle to the stick using more rubber bands. Insert the stick firmly into an open spot in your garden where nothing will overhang the gauge.

Help your child to devise a chart on which he can track rainfall over the year and remind him to check his rain gauge after rain. (He may well become quite the rain 'watcher' and run to the gauge whenever a shower has fallen.) Older children might like to create a more complicated perpetual calendar to chart not only when rain falls but also all types of atmospheric conditions.

## storm watch...

Observing the weather is a good starting point for discussions on wind, air, clouds, and other atmospheric phenomena. In particular, thunderstorms provide the most amazing visual experiences for children: the changing colour of the sky, billowing clouds and lightning in its many forms make great theatre.

Safety is paramount when setting off to observe changeable weather, particularly when lightning is about. Some children (and the family pet) are terrified of thunderstorms, so be guided by your knowledge of your child to determine not only whether it's safe to head out, but how your child will react to the experience.

Go to a safe, protected spot for uninterrupted viewing. Driving to the beach and staying in your car can be a good option. Never shelter under a tree and always avoid open spaces. Pack a camera or journal and let your children snap or draw while they watch the display. Also encourage them to talk about where the weather comes from and why it is doing what it's doing.

You might like to check with your local weather bureau before undertaking this activity. As a general rule of thumb, if you count the seconds between thunder and lightning, and it is under 30 seconds, it most likely means that the storm is less than 10 km (6.2 miles) away and it is probably advisable to stay indoors.



## *All creatures*

All creatures deserve a place in the environment although, frankly, some can look quite frightening and easily scare children. It's important though, to reinforce that everything has its place and that we need animals and insects as much as they need us. For example, try to resist killing a simple house spider. Instead, remind your children that these spiders are the natural enemy of flies and mosquitoes.

Encouraging children to learn about the diversity of the animal kingdom and our interdependency has several benefits. It instils compassion, ignites the imagination and encourages respect for all creatures.

Watching small insects go about their everyday lives can mesmerise young children – the busier the insect, the quieter the child. Industrious little ants going around in circles, or marching proudly in a frenetic but seemingly straight line, will fascinate your child. A spider busying herself in a web, scuttling to and fro until the perfect shape is achieved can also have the same effect.

Do remember, when observing insects, that a bite or sting can be poisonous, so children should keep their distance until you are sure it's safe for them to handle them.

