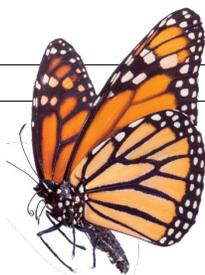




[ KIDS CORNER ]



## Insects Are Everywhere (Thank Goodness!)

**M**aternal instinct sometimes trumps science and reason—protection is likely your top priority when it comes to your children’s encounters with creepy crawlies. When a toddler exclaims, “Look, Mommy, a spider!” and reaches into a dank corner of the garage, your “Don’t touch!” reaction could squash her curiosity and instill unnecessary fear. Insects aren’t as dangerous as you might think, and the short list of real (i.e., poisonous) culprits is, well, short. The truth is that most insects are harmless and many play a major role in pollination, pest control, and the food chain. Next time your kid reaches for a bug, instead of squashing her natural curiosity and instilling a sense of fear, help her understand insects’ important role in a healthy ecosystem. These activities will jump-start her appreciation for bugs, and you’ll enjoy her bug-eyed excitement, too.

### Go hunting

Insects are all around, but in our macro world, we sometimes overlook their micro existence. Grab a small mesh net, an insect guide, and an opaque plastic container (with a lid), and go on an “insect hunt.” Examine creepy crawlies up close and note characteristics such as color, body shape, number of legs, and habitat. Use your bug guide (*Caterpillars, Bugs, and Butterflies Take-Along Guide* by Mel Boring) to identify them. The result? Your kids’ confidence and connection to nature will increase. Plus, knowledge is power: They’ll be safer knowing which bugs to avoid—and which to attract.

### “Pick” a flower

Don’t *actually* pick it, but seek out an intact, petaled perch and watch it for several minutes. You’ll likely see several species of insects come and go, collecting nectar and pollen—after all, without insects as pollinators, things like cotton clothing, berries, nuts, honey, and chocolate wouldn’t exist. Check on “your” flower at different times throughout the day and night, and help your kids notice patterns in the activity of different buggy drop-ins.

### Pollination relay

Game on! Pollination is serious (and important) stuff, but understanding it is easy (and fun). Even youngsters can play this simple game. Begin by setting up two brightly colored bowls to represent flowers. Fill one bowl with cotton balls or other small tokens and leave the other one empty. Start the game with a butterfly metamorphosis role-play: “Hatch” from (stand-still) eggs into caterpillars, then crawl through a makeshift obstacle course to transition into full-fledged butterflies. With new make-believe wings, “fly” between “flowers,” transferring the cotton balls (nectar and pollen) between bowls, one at a time. The game ends when the first flower is empty and the second one is pollinated—full of the token “pollen.”

### Go see ‘em

Natural history museums and zoos often have much wider ranges of insect examples than you’ll find in your backyard. Bright colors and dramatic features—have you ever seen a male rhinoceros beetle?!—can inspire the wide-eyed entomologist in your child.

— Christina Allen, an environmental educator and mother, teaches kid-friendly outdoor activities at the Thorne Ecological Institute, which operates year-round environmental-education programs for kids between the ages of 3 and 15. For more information on Thorne’s programming, visit [www.thorne-eco.org](http://www.thorne-eco.org).



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