



Birds chirping, flowers blooming, temperatures rising—springtime is a smorgasbord for the senses. The frigid winter months now just a distant memory, it's time to turn off the TV, peel your little couch potatoes from the sofa and explore the great outdoors.

Here are five family-friendly activities to get you started.

Bug Safari

Unless the lawnmower is on the blink, your backyard probably isn't exactly the Great Plains where the deer and the antelope play. Still, there are plenty of curious critters crawling about your neighborhood—and all you'll need to see them are a magnifying glass and a little patience. We're talking about bugs here, and while they may not carry the cuteness factor of a sleepy-eyed koala bear or a backstroking otter, insects are an interesting bunch—especially when examined closely.

So break out the safari wear and take a tour of your back yard or Local Park. Bring along an insect field guide, a magnifying glass, a camera and a pencil and paper to document your journey. And, most important, watch where you step!

What You'll Need:

- insect field guide
- magnifying glass
- camera
- pencil and journal
- bug fun facts





Bug Fun Facts

Impress your kids with these strange-but-true bug facts:

- Butterflies taste with their feet, a handy trait considering they land on flowers feet first.
- Grasshoppers can leap 20 times the length of their body, which would be like a human jumping halfway across a [football](#) field!
- While gathering food, a bee may fly up to 60 miles a day. That's a lot of trips to the refrigerator!
- Ants can lift and carry up to 50 times their own weight. That would be like a 200-pound man carrying a 5-ton weight on his back!
- Only female mosquitoes bite people; male mosquitoes, thankfully, feast on plants instead.
- Talk about losing your head: A cockroach can live a week without its noggin. It only dies because it can't drink water without a mouth.
- Fireflies and glowworms are beetles that can light up at night. They flash their lights on and off to send messages to each other.
- Be careful to never squash a yellow jacket near its nest. A dying yellow jacket releases an alarm pheromone that calls its comrades to action. Within 15 seconds, yellow jackets within a 15-foot area will rally to the victim's aid.



Blooming Names

Use flower power to make a name for yourself—literally. Start by purchasing packets of seeds for flowers that grow quickly and vigorously in your region. Next, have your child write her name in the garden soil with a large stick. Following packet directions drop the flower seeds into the dirt lines. Cover the seeds with dirt, and water them according to packet directions. Pretty soon, a flower garden will grow in the shape of your child's name!

What You'll Need

a small patch of yard with rich topsoil
packets of flower seeds
a large stick

Butterfly Feeder

The darlings of insect society, butterflies have won many admirers with their fancifully colored wings and docile nature. Invite these winged fairies to your backyard by building a butterfly feeder. Start by taking a paper or plastic bowl (a dish with sloping sides will work, too), and suspend it from a tree branch using fishing line or flower pot hangers. Next, you'll need to whip up some snacks (or nectar) for your butterfly guests. Simply mix 1 part sugar to 9 parts water, and boil this solution for a few minutes. Pour the cooled mixture into your butterfly feeder; store the rest in the refrigerator.

What You'll Need:

a paper or plastic bowl, 2-inches deep
fishing line or flower pot hangers
sugar

To better your chances of attracting butterflies, plant flowers that they find desirable. Some butterfly favorites include black-eyed Susan, lilacs, marigolds, goldenrod, daylilies and lavender. To learn more about these elegant insects, check out the official [North American Butterfly Association website](#).



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Pizza Garden

What You'll Need

a hoe, trowel or hand rake
compost or manure

Pizza doesn't grow on trees—it grows in gardens! Teach your children valuable lessons about seeds, soil, roots and the importance of sunlight by planting a pizza garden. What's a pizza garden? It's a patch of soil where you plant and grow an assortment of scrumptious herbs and veggies that can be used to make a delicious (and nutritious) pizza: tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, basil, onions and so forth. If you enjoy cheese on your pizza pie—and who doesn't?—a quick trip to the grocery store is essential. This step, of course, doesn't apply to those lucky few who have stumbled upon the elusive “cheese plant”. You know who you are.

Lay the groundwork for your pizza garden by selecting a size-appropriate plot with rich soil and exposure to plenty of sunlight. Prepare the soil by turning it with a hoe, trowel or hand rake, and then fertilize the area with compost or manure. Take the vegetable seeds you've purchased and place them in the soil according to the instructions on the packet.

Label the areas where you've placed the different varieties of seeds (you can do this by attaching index cards with the name of each vegetable to small stakes or twigs, and then place the stakes in the appropriate area of the garden). Be sure to water your garden according to the instructions on the seed packets. Have your children keep a journal where they can record the garden's progress and draw pictures of the budding plants. When the garden begins to flourish—this will take a couple of months—celebrate by selecting the ripe vegetables and using them to make a tasty pizza with your kids. Remember that kids are more likely to try foods they've had a hand in making, a great bit of news for parents with veggie-snubbing kids.

Pine Cone Bird Feeder

You'll see plenty of action with this popular easy-to-make craft that is guaranteed to transform your backyard into a burgeoning bird bistro. Satisfy flocks of famished feathered friends with an assortment of pine cone bird feeders, which are easily hung from the trees in your neighborhood. Just don't expect these on-the-fly diners to leave much of a tip.

Start by mixing together the cornmeal with the shortening (you can also use bacon fat or melted suet). Spread the cornmeal mixture over the entire pine cone, making sure that the crevices are also filled with the cornmeal mixture. Cover the bottom of a shallow pan or dish with the bird seed. Dip and roll the pine cone in the bird seed until it is completely covered. Place the bird seed-coated pine cone on a plate, and let it harden overnight.

What You'll Need
cornmeal
shortening (or bacon fat or melted suet or peanut butter)
bird seed
shallow pan
string or yarn

The next morning, tie a piece of string or yarn to the top of the pine cone, looping the string under the topmost leaves of the pine cone, and then tie a knot in the top. Your pine cone should now resemble a Christmas ornament. Hang your completed pine cone feeder from a tree branch in your yard. Then sit back and wait for the crowds to arrive.



Attracting Butterflies

Time: 10 to 20 minutes

Materials Garden spot that can be viewed from a window

- Seeds or plants that attract butterflies such as zinnias, marigolds, asters, hollyhocks, or other purple, yellow, and orange flowers

Directions

1. You can attract butterflies into your yard by creating a garden spot that contains the kinds of plants that nourish and attract them. Plant the seeds/plants compactly. Butterflies especially like purple, yellow, and orange flowers and those with short petals or flat tops that are easy to land on.
2. Sit back and enjoy the beauty from your window together with a nice cup of tea.

Extensions

- Make a butterfly viewing zone with some soft pillows and quiet music.
- Buy a small pair of binoculars for close-up butterfly watching.

Digging for Treasure

Materials Small objects to hide

- Shovels
- Colander
- Sandbox

Directions

1. Hide small objects in the sandbox for your toddler to find as he digs about.
2. Try using an old kitchen colander to sift through the sand.
3. If you like, spray-paint rocks in shiny silver and gold, and show your toddler how to search for hidden treasure.



Balloon Kites

Flying a kite is difficult and frustrating for toddlers and preschoolers. These "kites" are guaranteed to fly, even on days with light wind.

Materials

- Large, round helium balloons
- Kite string
- Paper streamers (optional)

Directions

1. Tie one end of a long length of kite string to a round helium balloon and the other to your child's wrist.
2. He will find it fun and easy to fly his balloon, and you won't worry about crashes and tangles.
3. Try attaching lengths of paper streamers to the balloon to give it a more authentic kite look.

Other Outdoor Games for Kids

1. **Big Foot Relay.** Have the [children](#) bring two shoeboxes with them. Tape the lids onto the boxes, and then cut a one-inch-wide and four-inch long slit in each top. Have the contestants slip their feet into the slits in the boxes and race.

2. **Name-It Ball.** Have players form a circle. Give one player a rubber ball. That player selects a category, such as "candy bars." He or she then bounces the ball to another player in the circle, who must catch the ball, state an item from the category, such as "Snickers," and keep the ball moving to the next player. If the player can't name an item, holds the ball too long, or repeats an item, he or she is out.

