

# Exploring at the Speed of Life

A toddler's hands-on introduction to the natural world.

BY DONALD FRASER

Towards the end of winter last year, weather often kept the always-curious Clara inside for much of the day. She would perch patiently on the chesterfield in front of our bay window and wait for something exciting to come into view.

“Bah!” she’d shout when a bird would come to the feeder. You have to speak one-year-old to know that this means bird. “Wuh-wuh!” she’d cry when a dog would pass by, her attempt at “woof-woof.” While her vocabulary improved, her patience for being inside didn’t.

With two nature loving parents, Clara is definitely an outdoor kid. And, like her parents, she was tired of being cooped up.

When spring finally arrived we started taking her out for little excursions in her stroller or carrying her on our backs. She loved every minute of it. Even very young infants absorb the sights and sounds of the outdoors – sunlight moving in and out from behind clouds, the smell of grass or flowers in the garden, the feel of wind on their faces and hair.

This year, though, she’s ready to take the lead. Just like any kid should be. Exploring, after all, is fundamental to a toddler’s emotional, social, and physical development.

It’s also a stress-free way to get fresh air and exercise. Best of all, it takes no special skill, equipment, apparatus, or even energy on the part of dad. So we are all uniquely qualified!

In fact, I’m going to share with you the only rule there is about helping your toddler discover her world: go at her speed. Oh, there are other rules, like making sure there is always adult supervision, and keeping away from traffic, rushing rivers, and large mammals. But these are more general parenting rules, and you should have those down by the time you’re wandering the neighbourhood with your kid.

For exploring, moving at the child’s speed is essential. Very young children take a while to process sensations and information. They need time to properly absorb new experiences. Be prepared for your kid to be fascinated by any random object: an insect, a flower, a crack in the sidewalk ...

And let her use her hands as well as her eyes. Kids want to feel their world as much as view it. This all but guarantees that a certain amount of dirt will end up both on and in her, but a little dirt never hurt anyone.

With Clara, we know that if we hear the honk of Canada geese, we will have to stop and look skyward for her to point at the



Photo: Donald Fraser

incoming flock. There’s not a twig or stone that we can pass by without her picking it up and showing it to us – or a puddle that isn’t perfect for splashing with a bare hand. And heaven forbid that we don’t stop and look at the ducks at the bridge by our house.

Which means that a “walk” might end up being only to the end of our street or even less.

But remember, this really isn’t about you. You’ve seen a caterpillar before. And a blue jay. And a crack in the sidewalk. For your kid, though, this is all brand new. And she’ll love you all the more for doing things her way.

*Donald Fraser writes for television, radio, print, and web publications. He’s mastered the art of moving slowly.*

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