

September 28, 2023
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For Immediate Release

Get Outdoors – The largest Classroom.

Welcome to Fall in Nebraska. I look forward to this time so much each year. As an outdoors enthusiast, I love to be outside, especially in the fall. Taking a hike in the woods or on a walking path is a great opportunity to take in some fresh air and to share your knowledge with the youth around you. The outdoors is the biggest natural classroom. There are so many things to see and do outside. You can turn any leisurely stroll into a learning opportunity for anyone. Whether you are in the woods, the park or just walking around your block, don't overlook those learning opportunities. Here are some of my favorites.

A great learning activity is leaf collecting. Encourage your group to collect leaves while on your walk. Talk about how they are alike and how they are different. How many different trees can you count? Can you find "living" leaves and "dead" leaves from the same tree? Why are they different? How are they alike? This activity turns a walk into a lesson on nature and comparison. The best part is you don't have to be an expert. You don't have to know if the leaves were from a cottonwood or a catalpa. You just must be willing to open the communication and challenge the kids to ask the questions. If they ask you something you don't know, tell them you will have to look it up and get back to them. That opens the door to another conversation in the future.

Another fun activity is nature or scavenger hunts. Bring along a plastic bag and a list of items to find. For example, your list could include directions like look for something shiny, something rough, something smooth, something soft, something that is shaped like a star or even something smelly. Kids will love this type of activity. They will challenge each other, and you may be surprised how much effort they put into completing their list.

At the end of your walk compare your finds. Did they find the same things or different items for the same question? As a bonus, did they realize that they were picking up trash along the way? Maybe not but you just did your part to help keep those items out of our rivers and streams.

When you add an activity to a walk, it takes the focus off the distance you go and puts it on what you see along the way. I especially like to look for tracks or signs of wildlife when I'm on a walk. Again, you don't have to know what kind of animal or bird it was but just start the conversation and the kids will do the rest. You could ask, 'where do you think it was going?' or "have you seen these tracks before?" Before you know it, you have been walking for an hour and the kids have changed topics 10 times.

As Nebraskans, we are never sure how long this beautiful season will last. Some years we get a few weeks and some years it goes from high heat to cold in record time. So, make the most of this beautiful season and learn a little along the way. If you would like any other suggestions on how to make the most of the outdoors as a learning experience, please contact the Buffalo County Extension Office.

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