



Playing in a Patch of Dirt: Eleven Picturebooks and a Plug for Nearby Nature

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Abstract

Children bring natural curiosity to outdoor exploration that allows them to notice the small details of natural spaces around them. Often, adults must relearn this skill. A nearby nature mindset can help. In this Reflection I share a personal story of children teaching me about nearby nature. I name eleven picturebooks that can help adults and children alike to notice the nature that they encounter on a daily basis in their own neighborhoods.

Keywords

[nearby nature](#), [nature play](#), [nature](#), [picturebooks](#), [early childhood climate literacy](#)

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My kids keep trying to teach me about the concept of [nearby nature](#): that nature sites can be found in unexpected places close to home. Back in the days of pre-Covid life, one especially long weekday comes to mind. Our family members had been at our respective places of work/school/childcare all day and then gone directly to a PTO meeting in the evening, appreciatively shoveling pizza onto plates before the kids went to play in the gym. Attending the PTO meeting meant we missed our usual after school outdoor time.

As we left the school that evening, our kids were in various levels of meltdown. Despite my desire to get everyone in the car and buckled up, the kids were compelled to explore a small dirt patch by the bike rack. Almost immediately, they settled into a calm – active - alert state. One child scratched at the dirt with a little rock while the other two swung upside-down on the bike rack. I stepped back to observe. Nobody was fighting. Bodies were moving. The patch of dirt was just

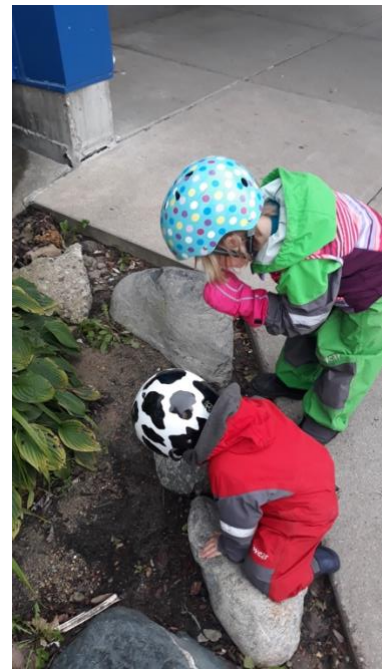
right for them to get some sensory stimulation, even among little pieces of litter and possibly a bit of broken glass. Everyone was calm again as we hopped in the car to head home.

Did hanging on a bike rack and playing in a patch of dirt count as time in nature? Well, it certainly wasn't [forest bathing](#) on the North Shore of Lake Superior, but I would argue yes. [Nature](#), and its positive effects for humans, exists along a continuum. In one research synthesis, the author found that [everyday nature](#), including views of nature out of windows and being in urban green spaces, has a positive effect on human health (Kuo, 2015). Another study cites a local urban park as a powerful tool for students with ADHD: after a twenty-minute park walk, the students' concentration improved significantly, in a similar way that the dirt patch helped my kids calm down that evening (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2009).

For those of us who live in more urban areas and are looking for nature near home, this realization has important implications. We don't need to wait to get out to "big nature" to reap the benefits that nature offers. We can take in smaller bits of nature near our homes. Learning to appreciate [nearby nature](#), as suggested by [Emma Marris in her Ted Talk](#) "Nature is Everywhere," helps us expand our definition of nature to encompass all its aspects. The goal is not to stop protecting wild places, but to start noticing the natural places in our own neighborhoods where children can fully engage, touch, and go off path.

The unglamorous dirt patch was enough to give my kids a sense of freedom and calm. They intuitively know the value of nearby nature and easily seek it out. As adults, we sometimes need reminders and reframings to slow down and learn to appreciate what we otherwise take for granted.

With that in mind, I offer a collection of great picturebooks to help us all maintain a "nearby nature" mindset. The [#ownvoices](#) books in this selection feature a child from a nondominant group *and* the author or illustrator who identifies as a member of that group. I hope these books will help you enjoy nearby nature with your kids. [Free Forest School](#) has been instrumental in helping me slow down and let my kids lead, whether we are in the woods or exploring a storm drain. I am working to tune in to what my kids notice and to be in the moment for each patch of dirt that they find.

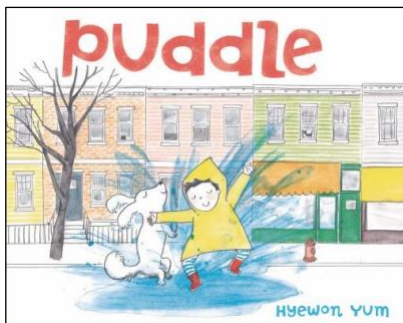




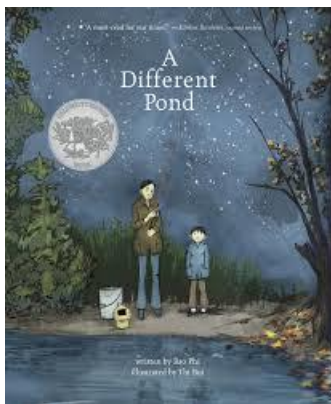
[Here and Now](#) by Julia Denos, illustrated by E.B. Goodale. This book helps young children and their caregivers to focus on mindfulness in the moment. Notice what is happening, in the here and now, in the exact place where you are rooted.



[Finding Wild](#) by Megan Wagner Lloyd, illustrated by Abigail Halpin. Two kids go on an urban hike in search of “wild.” What will they find? Where will they find it? This book shows that urban places offer wild spots, too.



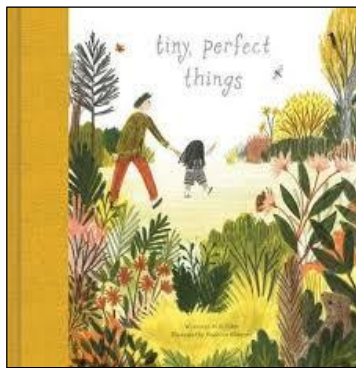
[Puddle](#) by Hyewon Yum. A child doesn't want to go outside because it's soggy and gray. His mom entices him by drawing pictures of him and his dog splashing in puddles. This does the trick to get the boy outside in real life. An ode to neighborhood puddles told in #ownvoices.



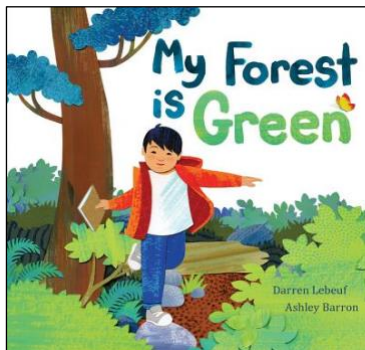
[A Different Pond](#) by Bao Phi, illustrated by Thi Bui. In this #ownvoices story, a child and his father go fishing at a neighborhood pond early in the mornings. During this time together, the parent shares stories of his life in Vietnam before emigrating to the United States while the boy proudly contributes to putting a fish dinner on the family table.



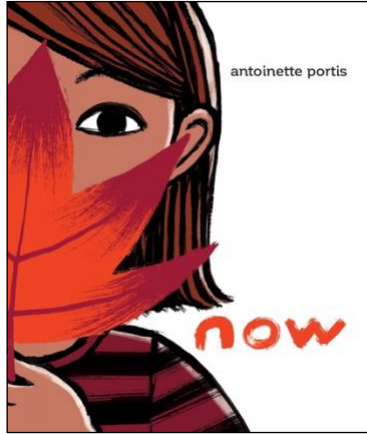
[On a Magical Do-Nothing Day](#) by Beatrice Alemagna. A child wants to stay on her device battling Martians but her parent sends her outside to play. She's determined to be bored until the magic of her play takes over.



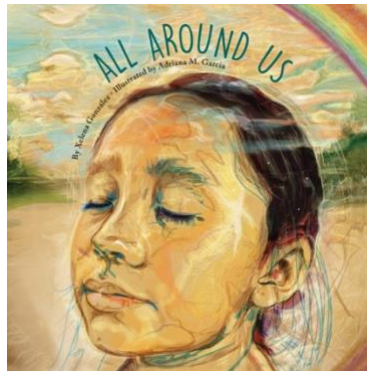
[Tiny Perfect Things](#) by M.H. Clark. One joy of caring for young children is the fresh eyes they bring to simple acts like a neighborhood walk. In this story a child and their caregiver notice all the tiny perfect things on their daily jaunt down the sidewalk.



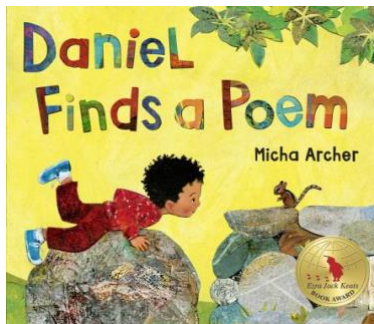
[My Forest is Green](#) by Darren LeBeuf, illustrated by Ashley Barron. The child in this book lives in a city and visits the urban forest throughout the seasons, afterwards creating nature art back at his apartment.



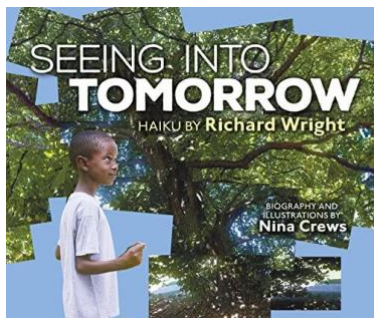
[Now](#) by Antoinette Portis. A book about being in the present. This child notices each leaf, puddle, and cloud that she encounters because she appreciates the nearby nature in front of her, right now.



[Por Todo Nuestro Alrededor/All Around Us](#) by Xelena González, illustrated by Adriana M. Garcia. In this #ownvoices story, Grandpa teaches his grandchild about the circles all around us: in the rainbow (the other half is underground), around his big belly, in the seeds they plant in the garden, in the round moon.



[Daniel Finds a Poem](#) by Micha Archer. Daniel notices the specifics of the world around him. This book is great to read aloud due to the repetitive text—see the author's ideas for actions to match the story [here](#).



[Seeing into Tomorrow](#) by Richard Wright and Nina Crews. Another #ownvoices story, it presents a collection of haiku poems about the spring hills and shade trees of the author's childhood. Nina Crews' collage illustrations bring us back to those places.

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