



BLOG

Stepping Outside the Classroom to Learn Lessons for Life

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Exploration is learning as two young people find frogs on a national forest. The Every Kid Outdoors program focuses on introducing 4th graders to the great outdoors by offering them a free pass to 2,000-plus federal land and water sites. The Forest Service expanded the program this year, offering 5th graders a free voucher for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year. (USDA Forest Service photo)

Stop by any trailhead or boat landing on a national forest or grassland and take a moment to ask folks to explain the origins of their love for the outdoors. You will likely hear people

return time and again to some formative experience they had in grade school. For some, the smell of the pine brings them back to camping with a cub scout troop. For others, getting their hands dirty stirs memories of a favorite teacher's class garden.

These seemingly ordinary experiences from our youth often serve as the roots of a persistent drive to lace up our boots and hit the trail or grab the chalk bag and scale a cliff face.

Recently, USDA [Forest Service](#) announced the expansion of the 2020–2021 [Every Kid Outdoors](#) program from just fourth graders to include fifth-grade students, who this year missed the opportunity to use their Every Kid free pass on a regular basis. The program encourages kids and their families to take advantage of more than 2,000 federal land and water sites hoping that these early adventures instill a life-long love of the outdoors.

The program also includes the Department of the Interior, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

“I think the program is fantastic. It's such a great opportunity for educators and families,” said Marie Corbin-Keane, a longtime instructor of the Junior Maine Guide Program and a retired fifth-grade teacher at Crescent Park Elementary School in Bethel, Maine. “Fourth and fifth graders are at a special age when they are coming to really understand the world around them and can begin acting to protect it. And learning through hands-on activities outdoors can really help kids who struggle in traditional classrooms shine bright – they often become the stars of the show.”

Researchers agree. Studies have shown that ages 9 to 11 are [key developmental years](#). Fourth and fifth graders, who primarily make up that age group, are developing the ability to empathize, are becoming more independent, and are better equipped to engage with and learn from the surrounding environment. In addition, the memories we acquire during these years tend to stick with us for the rest of our lives.

Going outside presents a dynamic venue for learning important life skills. The outdoors can serve as a classroom, a laboratory, or a playground where children can experiment and learn. They can expand their creativity and delve into their imagination.

“When you take students outdoors they learn lessons that are very hard to teach in a 65-degree classroom where you can walk down the hallway to fill your water bottle,” said Doug Alford, Spanish language teacher and director of the Ski Patrol Program and Fall Outing Club at Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine.



“It’s about more than staying warm and carrying your own backpack,” he said. “Taking groups of kids outside to experience the great outdoors teaches them how we rely on each other to accomplish goals, how to communicate with peers, and how to lead and take care of each other. It is very powerful for social building.”

The Forest Service has a long and storied legacy of outdoor education. Through Every Kid Outdoors, the agency is working to ensure that more children benefit from learning outside and that kids have the chance to develop lifelong connections to public lands.

“This is such a great program, and we need to get the word out,” said Corbin-Keane and Alford.

Every Kid Outdoors pass holders also can get a free permit to cut a Christmas tree on participating national forests. Permits are available through [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) while supplies last.



The Every Kid Outdoors website is for kids, taking them on an easy-to-follow journey to apply for and download a printed copy of the pass. The site also helps teachers and youth group leaders to [download passes for their students](#).



The Forest Service has moved its holiday tree permit sales to [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) as an added convenience for visitors. To obtain a free holiday tree permit, visit [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) and apply using your Every Kid Outdoors pass/voucher. (USDA Forest Service photo)

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