

The Universe through a Child's Eyes

There is something about parenthood that gives us a sense of history and a deeply rooted desire to send on into the next generation the great things we have discovered about life. And part of that is the desire to instill in our children the love of science, of learning and particularly the love of nature.

Your fascination with the universe and how to explore it as we so often do in the field of astronomy can be highly academic and dry as maybe it was if you took a course in astronomy. But when you get out there in the field at night, your equipment is just right and the night sky comes alive with activity, there is no other experience like it for majesty and pure excitement. And that is the kind of experience we want our children to come to love as much as we do.

It's actually not a big jump from play to learning for children when it comes to learning about the natural world, science and astronomy. Exploration is a natural part of being a child and growing up in a fascinating world and universe. So if we can find ways to take that natural desire to explore and instill a life long passion for astronomy, we will have given our children a truly great gift.

So with a few simple family activities, we can instill that love of astronomy in our offspring. Here are some ideas.

* Make star gazing part of family life. You already love to go outdoors as often as possible to enjoy the stars. So don't let that be your private passion. Get everybody into the act. The kids will love it and look forward to those nights as much as going to the circus.

* Make each new experience in growing into astronomy a fresh threshold. So the first experiences might be what you experienced as a kid, just laying on your back out in the country with the panorama of the stars overhead trying to take it all in. Go ahead and challenge them to count the stars. It's a fun exercise and one they will save to use as a joke on their kids when they do this same thing in a few decades.

* Take them along the road of learning, introducing binoculars so they can focus on particular areas of the night sky.

* Now they are hooked and want to know about why some of the stars are brighter than others. They have no idea they are going to astronomy school and don't even know it. You can tell them about the constellations as you point out how to find them by keying off the North Star. By being able to find things in that mass of stars and knowing there is such a vast amount more they can pick out, they are ripe for learning from star maps and about how the galaxies work.

* Think of their excitement as they notice the changes in the night sky. The phases of the moon and the effect of the rotation of the earth on the position of the planets. Help them find their favorite celestial bodies each

night. Before long they will learn to chart the movement of the stars just like the early astronomers did.

* Now you will get caught up in the excitement of finding new things to reveal to your excited crew of fledgling astronomers. When you reveal that you are going on a safari to see an eclipse, a meteor shower or the once in a lifetime appearance of a comet, that gift will as big as anything you might spring on them for Christmas.

The wonders of the night sky will captivate your children the way it has you for years. And you will have done them the greatest favor you ever could do by making them lifelong lovers of the universe.

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