

Fairy Houses Create Outdoor Fun and Capture Childhood Imagination

Fairies have always had a place in myths and folklore. Elves, gnomes, pixies and flower fairies have lit the imagination of children and adults alike throughout time. In the 1902 novel "The Little White Bird," J.M. Barrie wrote a story of the origin of fairies: "When the first baby laughed for the first time, his laugh broke into a million pieces and they all went skipping about. That was the beginning of fairies."

In today's world where the average child spends an average of six hours a day in front of the television and computer, childhood could use a little bit of "fairy magic" to help get kids outside and use their imaginations.

Building "fairy houses" has become somewhat of a phenomenon around the country. New England author and illustrator Tracy Kane has led the charge in an imaginative effort to help reconnect families with the natural world.

Kane's inspiration came from seeing fairy houses built in the woods on a small island off the coast of New England. To date, she has written three books and produced one video in "The Fairy Houses Series," which can be found online at www.fairyhouses.com.

Fairy houses are small whimsical habitats made from natural materials that children and parents dream up to attract fairies and their animal friends. They can be made out of natural materials such as sticks, bark, stones, dry grasses, pebbles, shells, pine cones and nuts.

These elfin abodes can be built on the front lawn, in a crook or stump of a tree, in a patch of woods, along a creek, or in a flower basket on the front porch. The whole idea is to get outdoors and enjoy exploring all that can be found there.

Most importantly, anyone—from toddlers to grandparents—can build fairy houses. All it takes is opening up the front

door and your imagination.

At our home, my daughters have named a patch of woods nearby "Fairy Woods." There, fairy homes they've built are, generally, in various stages of disrepair—a fairy condo made out of hemlock branches that collapsed in the snow and a small

fairy treehouse made last summer that has lost all structure and form. But none of that matters because it is the building process—hunting for natural materials, constructing the house, and imagining how the fairies will enjoy their time there—that is important.



"When I am building a fairy house, I think about the little fairies that need a home and the little rooms I am building them," says my 8-year-old when asked why she likes to build fairy houses. "I like

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to build fairy houses because they are cute, and I like to go check on them every day to see if any fairies have visited. I mostly use sticks, bark, acorn shells, moss, rocks and dead leaves and flowers."

"Building fairy houses is fun because you get to use different things in nature," adds my 6-year-old exuberantly. "Fairies live in nature and if you look really closely, you can see them in the trees if you look and see sparkles."

Fairy houses are one more way for parents to combat "nature-deficit disorder," a term coined by author **Richard Louv** in his book "Last Child in the Woods" that describes what happens to children and society when kids stop going outside to play.

Louv, a guru in the Leave No Child

Inside movement, totes the importance of children being familiar with the natural world around them, of having some ownership of nature.

"For this generation, nature is more of an abstraction than a physical reality," Louv said in a recent interview with the UK's *The Guardian*. "Kids today can tell you about the Amazon rainforest, but not about the last time they went in the woods alone."

Finding ways to encourage children to play outdoors takes some extra thought on the part of parents, but there are many ways to open the doors to imagination and the great outdoors. Building fairy houses is just one of many ways to enjoy time together outside.

by Jenni Frankenberg Veal