

The Call of the Wild

In the words of my husband, you haven't really experienced the zoo until you've walked those asphalt paths in 100 degree heat carrying a tired toddler, sticky with cotton candy and a snow cone.

True. But zoos are designed to provide families with a high quality recreational experience. Zoos are committed to protecting and conserving endangered species. They try to teach about animals and what they need, hoping that children will grow up thinking about how to protect their habitats.

Zoos have been around since at least 2500 B.C. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics depict wild animals kept in captivity for the entertainment of royalty. But it was in 1826 when the word "zoo" was first used by the Zoological Society of London. Zoos were still a rare thing until the Zoo Boom of the 1950's.

Mike Borders serves as the Director of the Scovill Zoo in Decatur, Illinois. Mike says that watching family interactions at the zoo are nearly as interesting as watching the animals there. Zoo employees observe parents bonding with their children. They see tears and laughter. And they see lots of opportunities for kids and parents to learn about everything from cheetahs to temper tantrums.

Imagine if you had never been to a zoo. Odds are, you would never have seen a monkey or a camel or a giant tortoise. Mike says it's great for kids to study about Australia, but actually seeing a wallaby makes Australia real.

A large zoo in another city did a survey of children to find out about their favorite zoo animal. They were expecting kids to choose one of the more exotic creatures. But the result was surprising. Kids said their favorite zoo animal was the goat.

Administrators of the zoo reflected on this unexpected finding and determined that the reason the kids liked the goat so much was because they visited the goat area in the petting zoo as part of a family experience. Parents were most involved when kids were actually touching the animals.

So enjoy the zoo together with your little one. Talk—and listen—about the animals you see together. Be prepared to follow his interest, spending your time in the areas which appeal to him. Don't feel pressured to see the whole zoo, but instead focus on fully experiencing those elements which attract your child's attention.

And start the experience before you even leave home by reading one of the great picture books about zoos. My favorites are *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell or *Good Night, Gorilla* by Peggy Rathburn or *Sam Who Never Forgets* by Eve Rice.

You can find these zoo books and more at your local public library... another local treasure!