



Teaching Values Through Green Living

A new book by a Maryland mom and environmental activist helps parents understand the connection between sustainability and kindness

By Jason Fontelieu

SHANNON BRESCHER SHEA remembers her first act of environmental activism as a third grader.

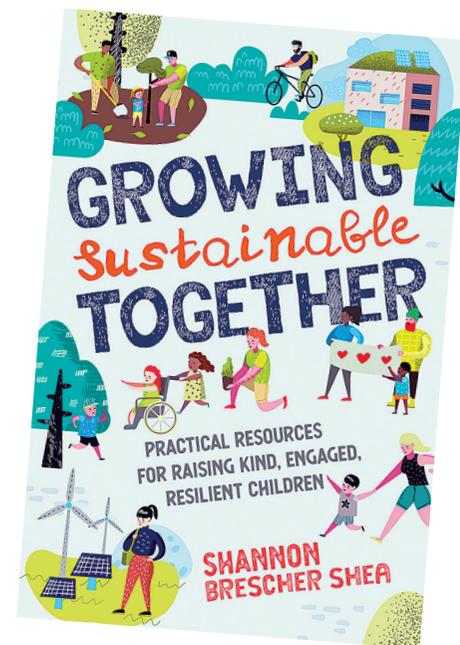
“I went to Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park in Florida with my parents, saw the manatees, absolutely fell in love with them and then found out they were endangered,” says Shea. Returning to school, the nature-loving kid convinced her class to adopt a manatee.

Shea’s success as a first-time activist inspired a lifelong commitment to environmentalism. She went on to receive a Master’s degree in nature, society and environmental governance from the University of Oxford and currently writes for the Department of Energy’s Office of Science.

But when she became a mom, Shea struggled to find time for her eco-friendly hobbies, including gardening, biking and composting, while juggling the “stresses of modern day parenting,” she says.

Until one day she realized that green living and parenting didn’t have to be at odds. Involving her children in the environmental activities she loved was actually part of being an engaged parent because, Shea says, she could “teach them how to be better people and ultimately, hopefully, good adults in the world.”

Gardening has become something the



Rockville resident and her two boys, ages four and seven, enjoy doing together—when her younger son isn’t spraying his brother in the face with the hose. They take bike rides and walks and have participated in a stream cleanup in Rockville Park and a climate march.

Besides just being fun things to do as family, these activities help her boys understand how they fit into larger environmental systems and how their behaviors affect other people, says Shea.

Earthly Inspiration

5 More Green Titles

And now, the environmental activist hopes to inspire other parents to live a greener lifestyle as a way to instill moral values in their own kids with her new book, “Growing Sustainable Together: Practical Resources for Raising Kind, Engaged, Resilient Children” (North Atlantic Books, 2020, \$16.95).

“Parents can teach most of these skills without a hint of environmental concern. But many actions that are environmentally sustainable also fulfill children’s psychological needs or teach them the skills and values needed to be a moral person,” Shea writes in Chapter 1. Subsequent chapters introduce different ways of being environmentally sustainable, such as the rejection of materialism, engaging in environmental activism and energy efficiency. Each ends with family activities, recommended children’s books and a compilation of resources to learn more on the topic.

“Growing Sustainable Together” is for parents and caregivers of toddlers through young teens. According to Shea, there are two reasons why it’s important to begin to introduce the complexity of the environment at a young age.

First, it helps kids “see their interconnectivity to the greater world” and breaks them out of the “it’s all about me” mentality, which can be as simple as explaining that somebody grew the food on their plate.

The second reason is that “kids are B.S. detectors,” says Shea.

“Even young kids are going to hear about climate change...and they’re going to ask about it.” Avoiding the subject or telling them they’re too young to hear about it could make the situation seem scarier now—and lead to cynicism as they get older.

Instead, Shea recommends tackling a difficult topic like climate change by “presenting it to them in a very age appropriate fashion with a little bit over time.” Attending protests, watching the news, even bringing reusable bags to the grocery store are all learning opportunities.

“Just pointing it out as you go along, kids pick up on these things,” she says. “They see we have values that we care about other people, we care about the Earth, we care about the environment and our family is living out those values every day.” ■

These five books bring the natural world into your home with their pictorial insights and prose. They tackle climate change, fracking and native leadership in the environmental movement as well as the water cycle and gardening. Kids can dig into these lesson-filled books—recommended by Hannah Fester, special projects manager at the Ivy Bookshop—all the while enjoying a good story.

“We Are Water Protectors,” by Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Michaela Goade, 40 pages, ages 3-6, \$17.99

I love how “We Are Water Protectors” introduces Indigenous-led environmental movements across North America through the lens of a child. And this book is as educational as it is gorgeous. The young person who rallies her community to protect the Earth’s most sacred resource becomes a symbol for the urgency of environmental movements more broadly and their inextricable connections to legacy, family and community.

“The Rhythm of the Rain,” written and illustrated by Grahame Baker-Smith, 40 pages, ages 4-8, \$17.99

I find this portrayal of the water cycle so breathtaking, totally antithetical to other more rigid, textbook ways I learned about this process as a child. “The Rhythm of the Rain” follows young Isaac as he empties out his jar of water and follows it all across the earth. It’s total magic, because you get to tour the world and its diverse landscapes and—spoiler alert—you’ll start to notice that the water always, always plays an essential role.

“Up in the Garden and Down in the Dirt,” by Kate Messner, illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal, 56 pages, ages 5-8, \$7.99

There’s nothing like some catchy repetition to charm your way into new knowledge. I recommend this book (part of a three-book series) for its repeating refrains of “up in the garden” and “down in the dirt,” which help display the parallel, interrelated worlds above and below ground in a garden. As you read about a child and grandmother working in the garden together, it’s fun to encounter regular reminders of the curiosities happening beneath their feet. It ends with an “About the Animals” glossary, and it’s lovely to flip back through and see if you can spot all the animals.

“The End of the Wild,” by Nicole Helget, 288 pages, ages 5-8, \$7.99

A poignant coming-of-age story centered around one 11-year-old’s resistance to fracking in her small town. With characters who support the economic boost of this development, “The End of the Wild” takes an elegant and nuanced approach to demonstrating the complexities of advocating for environmental protection. It’s perfect for middle grade readers with all kinds of interests, as it is a story not only about the environment, but also life on the poverty line, friendship and family—and, most of all, finding your place in the world.

“Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation,” by Octavia E. Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings, 272 pages, ages 13 and older, \$24.99

A new, faithful graphic novel adaptation of the 1993 classic from Octavia Butler, absolutely striking in visual form. Set in the U.S. in the midst of global climate change, economic crisis and social chaos in the early 2020s, there is no denying the eerie resonance of this tale today. Fifteen-year-old Lauren Olamina, guided by hyperempathy, translates her fight for survival into a new vision for a way forward. She embodies the critical role of youth leadership at the intersection of environmental, economic and social movements; her story contains encouragement and validation for young adult readers.