

JITTERBUGS AND LITTERBUGS

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

We were walking into a Post Office one day when we noticed a guy carrying his 3 year-old up to a nearby tree. He stopped to show the little girl a cicada that was sitting on the trunk. She was fascinated and gently touched it with her small stubby finger. She was not afraid because her father showed no fear. Yet, just before that we had observed a mother and her little girl exit their car. Immediately the mother cringed and lashed out at the cicadas flying around. The little girl snuggled into her mother in fear of these 'dangerous' insects. The mother was absolutely freaking out over something that could do no harm. It puzzles me why people develop such phobias about insects, most of which will not hurt them.

Our kids are going to mirror our attitudes until they know differently. Yes, they do need to know what things are harmful and which are not, which ones they can touch and which ones they should not. The same goes for animals. Some they can pat and some they should keep away from. That does not mean they should try to harm them if they don't 'like' them. They will be unlikely to develop any real appreciation of insects and their value to our world if they spend their time leaping away from them in terror. If we adults have irrational fears over little beasties then we should deal with it so we do not pass these negative attitudes on to our kids. We do not need to be jittery about bugs!

There is one bug that we should definitely not encourage and that is the litterbug. We live in a semi-rural area over by Percy Priest Lake in Nashville, Tennessee. We often go for walks in the evening. The scenery is just beautiful. The leaves on the trees are a mass of shimmering green. The birds are singing and all seems to be well with the world. Then we look down. Lying in the gutters all along the roadside is trash.

Why do people just toss their stuff out the windows without a thought about anything or anybody else? Every month or so my husband, Brian, goes along our extensive road frontage filling up big black trash sacks with bottles, cans, fast food packages and other trash that has been thrown onto our property as cars go by. Kids learn by example.

So, where do litterbugs come from? They come from homes where other litterbugs live. Litterbugs breed more litterbugs. They seem worse than cockroaches! I remember reading a true story in a New Zealand newspaper. A gas pump attendant was filling a customer's tank when the driver opened his window and emptied all his trash, cigarette butts and all, out on the forecourt. He then closed the window again. The attendant briefly disappeared while the gas was filling the tank and reappeared with a small brush and shovel. He quietly swept up the trash and knocked on the car window. When the driver opened the window, the attendant said, "Excuse me, Sir, I think you dropped this", and promptly poured the contents back into the car. YES! Now that was a lesson

learned in a hurry. It is a good idea to keep a trash sack in your car to place any unwanted material in and empty it when you get home.

How do we create in our kids a healthy appreciation for our wildlife, the environment and the need to keep it litter free? A great way to start is to encourage our kids' awareness by giving them the responsibility of planting, watering and caring for their own plants. By understanding what it takes for those plants to grow they will have a greater appreciation of their value to our lives and will be less likely to thoughtlessly damage tree limbs, stand or ride over garden plants and such like as they grow up. We can teach our kids the value in recycling by doing it ourselves.

If we train our kids to place their own trash in bins, they will learn to become responsible for keeping their environment clean. We also need to talk to our kids about going the extra mile in our effort to care for our environment by picking up trash that others have left behind. Brian used to supervise the school cafeteria. If he asked a child to place lunch trash on their tray where it wasn't clear whose it was, the response usually was, "I'm not doing that! I never put it there!" Of course, they did obey the request in the end, but not before exerting a major protest. The task would have taken a maximum of 2 seconds.

Insects and small creatures have been placed on this earth for a purpose and we need to appreciate and protect them. The environment belongs to all of us so we need to care for it with diligence, not just for ourselves, but for future generations. Part of the legacy we leave behind us is gained through us training our kids to do the same.

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