



children need nature

Nature deprived/deficit children : everyone loses

Today's kids are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, says child advocacy expert Richard Louv and research shows that "thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorder and other maladies." Drawing on personal experience and the perspectives of urban planners, educators, naturalists and psychologists, Louv links children's alienation from nature to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, stress, depression and anxiety disorders, not to mention childhood obesity. The research on attention-deficit disorder shows that a little bit of exposure to nature decreases ADD symptoms -- even in kids as young as 5. Researchers suggest we add nature therapy to two traditional therapies: behavioral modification and Ritalin and other stimulants. Could it be that some of the huge increase in ADD has to do with the fact we took nature away from kids? Could it be that nature deficit disorder is North America's latest syndrome in a long list of deficit problems?

Richard Louv gathered thoughts from parents, teachers, researchers, environmentalists and other concerned parties, to write his book "Last Child in the Woods". Louv argues that only a return to an awareness of and appreciation for the natural world would teach kids science and nurture their creativity. Furthermore, nature needs its children: where else will its future stewards come from?

For tens of thousands of years, children spent their childhood playing or working in natural settings. Within the space of two or three decades in Western society, that's in danger of ending. This is a radical change in a very short period of time. It has important, perhaps profound implications for mental health, physical health, and spiritual health.

Unstructured outdoor play was once standard for kids growing up. Children enjoyed digging forts, climbing trees and catching frogs without concern for kidnappers or West Nile virus. According to child advocate Richard Louv, such carefree days are gone for youth. Open meadows, woods and wetlands have been replaced by manicured lawns, golf courses and housing developments and this has led children away from the natural world. What little time they spend outside is on designer playgrounds or fenced yards and is structured, safe and isolating. Activities are generally structured (time and place) and limited to competitive activities (sports). These antiseptic spaces provide little opportunity for exploration, imagination or peaceful contemplation.

There's a real gap in research of linking nature to healthy child development but it's starting to be studied. A lot of the research comes out of the biophilia hypothesis (impact of nature on well-being). In every study, prisoners in prisons or people in the infirmary who have a view of a natural landscape heal faster. Now researchers are starting to observe kids playing on natural playgrounds, as opposed to concrete playgrounds and are finding that in a natural playground and without structure, children think more creatively and are much more likely to invent their own games and play more cooperatively. What's more, research has measured the radius kids tend to go away from their house. Between 1970 and 1994, that radius shrunk to one-ninth of what it had been and the hours children spend outside the home may have shrunk a similar amount of time.

What forces have conspired to keep kids inside? "Obviously electronics are part of it. Video games and television are fun, and very distracting, and very convenient for parents. Many boys and girls live a denatured childhood glued to electronic devices." Louv cites multiple causes for why children spend less time outdoors and why they have less access to nature: "our growing addiction to electronic media, the relinquishment of green spaces to development, parents' exaggerated fears of natural and human predators, and the threat of lawsuits and vandalism that has prompted community officials to forbid access to their land." Instead of passing summer months hiking, swimming and telling stories around the campfire, children these days are more likely to attend computer camps or weight-loss camps. As a result, Louv says, they've come alienated from nature. A 2002 British study reported that eight-year-olds could identify Pokémon characters far more easily than they could name "otter, beetle, and oak tree".

Louv writes: "When I first started interviewing parents, I thought **access to nature** would be the most important reason kids aren't going outside since the woods I played in as a kid is now the suburbs, but even parents who live where there is lots of open space say the same thing: kids aren't going outside. So access is important, but it's not at the top of the list." Louv was surprised to find that "The No. 1 reason parents give for children staying inside is : they're scared. Of "stranger danger." Child abductions. That fear is changing our lives. But, look at the statistics on abductions, almost all are by family members, and the number of abductions has been going down for about a decade. There's a study that says kids are safer outside the home than at any time since the 1970s."

Louv states "If those numbers are going down, what's going up ? It's media hype. You watch CNN, etc. and they take a handful of really terrible crimes against children and repeat them over and over again. When they get done telling us about the crime, they tell us about the trial over and over again. It's no accident people think there's a bogeyman on every corner. We're literally being conditioned to live in a state of fear, and this predates 9/11. So parental anxiety is really No. 1 on the list." Some of it is institutions too : if there's one thing they're almost as scared of as strangers, it's lawyers. It's the legal fear of the society that's the reason schools put up "no running" signs on the playground.

Early in the book Louv has a chapter called "The Criminalization of Natural Play." Add up all the federal, state, and local laws -- and all the well-meaning and probably necessary restrictions on kids picking up horny toads and the like, then add the enormous increase in covenants, conditions, and bylaws and restrictions -- millions of Americans now live in communities covered by restrictions. Louv writes "Just try to put up a basketball hoop in these communities, let alone build a tree house. The message to kids and parents is very clear: nature's in the past. It doesn't count anymore. The future's in electronics. Playing outdoors is illicit, dangerous and maybe even illegal. Children miss out when they don't experience nature and, in addition, they can't develop a respect for nature.

Increase the amount of nature in urban areas through green urbanism -like Western Europe and China where new eco-cities are being designed bringing nature into the city and erasing the artificial line between urban and natural. Small pieces of nature are vital.

In older cities there's often more nature than we suspect -like Central Park. In newer cities, everything is over-manicured, over-controlled. What is a kid supposed to do? Kids growing up in those neighborhoods are as much at risk as inner-city kids. There's a gap in the amount of nature and unstructured play available in new cities in North America.

While more data and analysis is needed to validate the impact of nature, Louv points out, "We do not have to wait for it. Intuition tells us that nature is good for children. A lot of parents have been getting kids outdoors based on nostalgia or instinct, but didn't have that body of evidence. So research is affirming to parents who are getting social pressure. "What do you mean you let your kids build a tree house? Don't you know they could fall out?" Pediatricians report they're not treating many broken bones in kids anymore. What they are seeing now are repetitive-stress injuries in children, (game boys, video games) which generally last a lot longer, sometimes permanently, compared to broken bones."

The chapter near the end of the book is called "The Spiritual Necessity of Nature for Children." The most important word in the book is wonder, writes Louv. The root of all spiritual life is that early sense of wonder. When's the first time a child has that sense of wonder? It's probably something simple. Like going out and turning over rocks, and seeing a universe of bugs that lived underneath. Louv insists "there is another dimension of wholeness here. When a child listens to leaves in the trees, they sense there's hope - something bigger than their parents' problems and that's more important than keeping up grade averages. Whatever one's spirituality, we all understand deep down that a sense of wonder is the beginning of it. No kid should go without the miracle of wonder."

Louv's idea of back to nature is not new but he adds a focus on the restorative qualities of nature for children. He recommends that we all reacquaint with nature through hiking, fishing, bird-watching and disorganized, creative play. He believes that by doing so we lessen the frequency and severity of emotional and mental ailments and recognize the importance of preserving nature. Louv compares physical activity with nature play and it is hard to know which benefits children most, the play or exercise and fresh air. But parents, educators, therapists and city officials can benefit from taking seriously Louv's call for a "nature-child reunion." "In our bones we need the natural curves of hills, the whisper of pines, the possibility of wildness," he writes. "We need patches of nature for our mental health and our spiritual resilience." Louv's prescription is simple: "More time in nature -- combined with less television and more stimulating play and educational settings -- will reduce attention deficits in children, and, just as important, it will increase their joy in life and create stewards of nature and environment for the future."

Louv's work has led to a new awareness and development of a movement: *Leave No Child Inside*. This initiative has the potential to reawaken interest in and care of nature. What we do have is circumstantial and anecdotal evidence. We know what kids do: 44 hours a week plugged into electronic media, more time in the car, organized sports, all of that. We know what our own eyes and experience tell us.

Nature Activities for Kids and Families

Parents, grandparents, and other relatives cannot resolve society's nature-deficit disorder

by themselves. Educators, health care professionals, policy-makers, business people, urban designers must lend a hand. The most important goal is for children to experience joy and wonder everyday, and to be encouraged to create their *own* nature experiences. As they grow older, they'll be into this and will expand the boundaries of their exploration.

Here are a few suggestions of nature activities to stimulate your own creativity.

1. Invite native flora and fauna into your life. Maintain a birdbath. Replace part of your lawn with native plants. Build a bat house.
2. View nature as an antidote to stress. All the health benefits that come to a child come to the adult who takes that child into nature. Children and parents feel better after spending time in the natural world—even if it's in their own backyard.
3. Help your child discover a hidden universe. Find a scrap board and place it on bare dirt. Come back in a day or two, lift the board, and see how many species have found shelter there. Identify these creatures with the help of a field guide. Return to this universe once a month, lift the board and discover who's new.
4. Revive old traditions. Collect lightning bugs at dusk, release them at dawn. Make a leaf collection. Keep a terrarium or aquarium. Go "crawdadding"—tie a piece of liver or bacon to a string, drop it into a creek or pond, wait until a crawdad tugs.
5. Encourage your kids to go camping in the backyard. Buy them a tent or help them make a canvas tepee, and leave it up all summer.
6. Be a cloud spotter; build a backyard weather station. A young person just needs a view of the sky (even if it's from a bedroom window) and a guidebook..
7. Make the "green hour" a new family tradition. A daily green hour, is a time for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world. Even fifteen minutes is a good start. "Imagine a map with your home in the center. Draw ever-widening circles around it, each representing a child's realm of experience,"
8. Take a hike. With younger children, choose easier, shorter routes and prepare to stop often. Or be a stroller explorer. "If you have an infant or toddler, consider organizing a neighborhood stroller group that meets for weekly nature walks," Involve your teen in planning hikes; prepare yourselves physically for hikes, and stay within your limits (start with short day hikes); keep pack weight down.
9. Invent your own nature game. Help kids pay attention during longer hikes by playing 'find ten critters'—mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, snails, other creatures. Finding a critter can also mean discovering footprints, mole holes, and other signs that an animal has passed by or lives there."
10. Encourage your kids to build a tree house, fort, or hut. Provide the raw materials, including sticks, boards, blankets, boxes, ropes, and nails, but let kids be the architects and builders. The older the kids, the more complex the construction.
11. Plant a garden. Choose seeds large enough for them to handle and that mature quickly, including vegetables. Encourage them to sell their extra produce, share with neighbors or donate to a food bank. In a high rise, create a high-rise garden.
12. Raise butterflies—from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to emerging monarch.
13. Collect stones. Even young children love gathering rocks, shells, and fossils.