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Helping Kids to Connect With the Natural World

When I was a kid growing up in the suburbs, we were ALWAYS outside. We loved climbing trees in the nearby woods that connected two local neighborhoods, biking to the playground three blocks away, or just hanging out on the big rock in my friend's backyard. And in our early teen years, it was pretty special to stay out longer than our younger brothers and sisters to play an early evening game of "hide-and-seek." Our parents always had a difficult time getting us all back into our homes for the evening. These memories are remarkably similar to memories described recently by friends and colleagues close to my age. But what about the kids of today? Are we seeing this same love of the outdoors?

While doing research in the late 1980's for a book on the new realities of family life, Richard Louv interviewed over 3000 parents and kids across the country. Through these interviews he gradually became aware of a rapidly emerging trend, something he later called "nature-deficit disorder." Children born after 1980 seldom heard the words "Go outside and play."

In his recent book, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Louv argues that American children have lost their connection to the natural world and now live a "denatured childhood." He believes this deprivation is not trivial, but instead a cause for some of today's disturbing health-related trends among children: the rise in obesity, attention disorders and depression. He uses Edward O. Wilson's concept of biophilia (the need to affiliate with other forms of life) to explain how essential a relationship with nature is to a child's development. "We need direct involvement with nature, we need to see natural shapes on the horizon. When we don't get that, we don't do so well." He cites research, including a 2003 Cornell University study that found less stress in children whose rooms had a view of nature. Other consequences of this "deficit" cited in his book include lack of creativity and curiosity, loss of respect for nature and the living world and a diminishing sense of community.

What are some reasons for this disconnection?

Louv suggests several reasons for this decrease in children's contact with the natural world. There is the disappearance of those "green" spaces in neighborhoods and communities such as the open meadow or field, or the woods serving as a buffer between housing developments. And unlike the days of my childhood, parents today tend to see the outdoors as a dangerous place. Kidnappings, predators, gangs, drug dealers, and virus-bearing mosquitos all contribute to a heightened sense of fear that is communicated directly and indirectly to children and youth.

But one of the most significant, according to Louv, has been the increasing fixation on television, video games, computers and other electronic entertainment. He identifies the role of society as "telling kids, unconsciously, that nature's in the past, it really doesn't count anymore, that the future is in electronics. And besides, the boogeyman is in the woods." He feels that unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it.

What are some solutions?

Louv's book has generated a lot of interest. The concept of "nature-deficit disorder" has been cited in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, research journals, local newsletters, and other publications.

Parents, educators, and communities are interested in exploring solutions to increase “environmental literacy.”

Richard Louv devotes the second half of his book to exploring community models such as bringing back “green space” to the urban environment, providing more access to existing “green space” in the urban environment, developing a vast network of bike paths, and encouraging schools to use the surrounding ecological community as a classroom.

The role of parents in reversing this “nature deficit-disorder” is most significant.

Following are some suggestions for parents.

- **Be a role model for your children.** Show your enthusiasm for getting outside and doing some fun things as a family such as hiking, fishing, visiting a wildlife refuge, bird-watching, and biking. A new study at Cornell University has shown that children who fish, camp and spend time in the wild before age 11 are much more likely to grow up to be environmentally-minded and committed as adults (Wells, Nancy; 2006).
- **Learn about the natural environment along with your child** through local, state and national programs and places. State Parks and National Parks are excellent examples.
- **Send your child to a “traditional” summer camp**, one that includes lots of time in the woods, hikes along nature trails, swimming, identification of plants, trees, and wildlife, and other outdoor activities designed to instill appreciation of the natural world.
- **Put your kids on a media diet, and start at an early age to establish the habit of making good media choices.** If there are family rules about screen time, children will be more likely to make choices involving outdoor activities.

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