

“Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder”

by Richard Louv

A SUMMARY

Today, kids are well aware of the global threats to the environment, but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature on a day-to-day basis, is fading.

A fifth-grader in a San Diego classroom put it succinctly: “I like to play indoors better ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are.”

I believe our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature. That unintended message is delivered schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities – effectively banning much of the kind of play that we enjoyed as children. Our institutions, urban/suburban design, and cultural attitudes unconsciously associate nature with doom, while disassociating the outdoors from joy and solitude. Well-meaning public-school systems, media and parents are scaring children straight out of the woods and fields.

Many parents are aware of the change, and they sense its importance. When asked, they cite a number of everyday reasons why their children spend less time in nature than they themselves did, including disappearing access to natural areas, competition from television and computers, dangerous traffic, more homework and other time pressures. Most of all, parents cite fear of stranger-danger, as round-the-clock news coverage conditions them to believe in an epidemic of child-snatchings, despite evidence that the number has been falling for years.

As a result, children’s worlds, limitless in cyberspace, are shrinking in reality.

As the nature deficit grows, new studies demonstrate just how important direct contact with the outdoors is to healthy human development. Most of the new evidence that connects nature to well-being and restoration has focused on adults, but during the past decade, scientists have begun to study the impact of nearby nature on child development. Environmental psychologists reported in 2003 that that nature in or around the home, or simply a room with a view of a natural landscape, helped protect the psychological well-being of the children.

Researchers have found that children with disabilities gain enhanced body image and positive behavior changes through direct interaction with nature. Studies of outdoor-education programs geared toward troubled youth — especially those diagnosed with mental-health problems — show a clear therapeutic value. Some of the most intriguing studies are being done by the Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois, where researchers have discovered that children as young as five showed a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention-Deficit Disorder when they engaged with nature. Could nature therapy could be a new option for ADD treatment?

Meanwhile, the California-based State Education and Environmental Roundtable, a national effort to study environment-based education, reports that schools that use outdoor classrooms, among other techniques, produce student gains in social studies, science, language arts and math; improved standardized test scores and grade-point averages; and enhanced skills in problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making. In addition, evidence suggests that time in natural surroundings stimulates children's creativity.

People who care about children and the future of the environment need to know about such research, but for the most part, they do not. Today we see dramatic increases in childhood obesity, attention difficulties and depression. When these issues are discussed at the conference table or the kitchen table, direct childhood experience in nature is seldom mentioned. Yet, the growing nature deficit experienced by today's children, and potentially for generations to come, may be the most important common denominator.

I am not suggesting that we bring back the free-range childhood of the 1950s. Those days are over. But, with a deeper understanding of the importance of nature play to healthy child development, and to their sense of connection to the world, we can create safe zones for nature exploration. We can preserve the open space in our cities, and even design and build new kinds of communities, using the principles of green urbanism. We can weave nature therapy into our health-care system, nature experiences into our classrooms. In education, we can build a No Child Left Inside movement.

And we can challenge environmental organizations to take this issue seriously. For if the disconnection between children and nature continues, who will become the future stewards of the earth – and who will swing on birches?