

No Child Left Inside: Connecting Today's Youth with the Outdoors

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Jacom Stephens

*"I like to play indoors because that's where all the electrical outlets are."
--San Diego 4th grader*

Do you remember a favorite place you had as a child? A tree house, a special place, a hideaway, a creek or some other natural spot? Many of us, particularly today's parents, have such fond memories. You may remember the days of free play outside, where you and your friends romped, explored, played fantasy games, and idled away your free time gazing at clouds and identifying shapes and figures.

Unfortunately, today's young people often do not share such moments. Just in the most recent years, the ways young people experience the outdoors and nature have change substantially. Kid's physical connection with nature and the outdoors is rapidly fading. As Richard Louv has so eloquently observed:

"For a new generation, nature is more an abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear—to ignore."¹

Louv mourns that day when an entire generation becomes distanced from the natural world—when we can easily imagine "the last child in the woods."

There is an urgent need to re-connect young people with the great outdoors and with the immediate environment. In addition to Louv, other writers² have warned that today's young people are increasingly becoming separated from the natural world that surrounds them. As a nation, if we hope to conserve our natural resources for future generations, we must re-connect young people to their environment. If children don't care about nature today, they won't care about conserving it in the future. We must "save our children from nature-deficit disorder."

4-H originated in the early part of the 20th century as a way to connect young people with their immediate surroundings rather than learning about the world from textbooks and lectures. 4-H has a strong history of connecting youth with the outdoors—through agricultural and animal projects, through camps, through field trips and tours, and many other educational activities. The outdoors must continue to be a classroom for today's young people who are increasingly becoming separated from nature. And so 4-H continues to be a great way to get kids outside experiencing nature first hand rather than only through the Discovery channel.

The importance of connecting with the natural world cannot be overemphasized. Climate change, pollution, endangered species, disappearing open spaces, erosion—all have become timely topics for today's generation and beyond. In addition, John Gardner of Harvard University has recently identified "nature intelligence" as the most recent form of eight kinds of what he calls "multiple intelligences."³ Nature intelligence means that a person is curious about the environment all around them—you notice what's around you in the outdoors and enjoy identifying and classifying things like plants or animals.⁴ Being "nature-smart" is a critical form of learning that must be cultivated and nurtured, even in today's high-tech world.

Why We Should Be Concerned

No child can truly know or value the outdoors if the natural world remains unknown or under glass, seen only through lenses, screens or computer monitors.

¹Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. New York: Workman Publishing. p. 2.

²Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond ecophobia: Reclaiming the heart of nature education*. Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society.

³Gardner, H. (2006). *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*. New York: Basic Books.

⁴Armstrong, T. (2003). *You're smarter than you think: A kid's guide to multiple intelligences*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Press. p. 157.



The urgency and need for renewed efforts to get children outdoors is evident from the research—

- Children now spend nearly 30 hours a week watching a TV or computer screen, listening to something through headphones or, for older children, using cell phones or media players.
- More 8-year olds today can identify more than 50 Pokemon characters than can identify native plants in the community where they live. Pikachu, Metapod and JigglyPuff are names more familiar to them than mountain goat, beetle, oak tree or even poison ivy.
- Research examining the effects of outdoor challenge programs on children's self-esteem and sense of self shows a link between contact with green space and developmental outcomes for youth.
- Two of every 10 children are clinically obese, and child obesity rates are increasing at an alarming rate—almost fourfold in three decades. A leading factor in this epidemic is lack of physical activity in the outdoors.
- Research studies describe evidence that links time spent outdoors to other health benefits beyond just weight control. Spending time in nature aids in stress-reduction and in the treatment of depression and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- From 1997 to 2003, there was a 50 percent decline in the proportion of children ages 9-12 who spent time in such outside activities as hiking, walking, fishing, beach play and gardening.
- Urban growth in the last century has eliminated green spaces and natural environments. The proliferation of air conditioning in more affluent countries has had an impact on the way children and adults experience and perceive the outdoor environment.
- Technology opens worlds never before so readily available to children; however the opening of this side of learning has contributed to shutting the door to children's access to the more natural environment that gives a lasting attachment to children's sense of place.
- Children who experience the natural world and have opportunities to play and learn within it are more likely to choose science or related fields as careers.
- Images of Lassie aside, most rural children are no more active than their urban counterparts—16.5% of rural kids are obese compared to 14.4% of urban kids. Ironically, rural kids often have fewer places to walk and play.
- School budgets have slashed physical education programs in cost-cutting moves that have resulted in plummeting participation in daily physical education—down to 25% from 42% just 17 years ago.
- Research has shown that free play in nature increases children's cognitive flexibility, emotional capacity, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, use of imagination, self-esteem and self-discipline. It makes them smarter, more cooperative, happier and healthier.
- Research has found that green outdoor spaces foster creative play, improve children's access to positive adult interactions—and relieve symptoms of attention-deficit disorders. The greener the setting, the more the relief.

Getting Kids Outdoors

As a concerned parent, what can you do to help re-connect today's generation with nature? You don't need to plan a trip to Yellowstone or some other grand adventure. Nature is right outside your door. Here are some suggestions.

- Spend time with your children outdoors—in the yard, in neighborhood parks, or in any green space no matter how small.

- Start a family garden.
- Take a hike.
- Go for a picnic at a local park.
- Create a nature scavenger hunt to help kids really “see” what is around them. A superb resource is Joseph Cornell’s book, *Sharing Nature with Children*.
- Go bike riding in your area. Desert trails and washes are great places to explore.
- Encourage your children to play outside when the weather is nice.
- Visit your public lands—municipal, state and federal. Look for programs that introduce you to exploring these places.
- Plant a tree. Observe it during different times of year and care for it.
- Go fishing.
- Get involved in the 4-H entomology project and start collecting insects and displaying them.
- Go camping.
- Observe plants as they change throughout the year. The USA National Phenology Network is a great resource for this and has lots of tools. Visit their website at: <http://www.usanpn.org/>
- Visit a public preserve. Arizona has many fine places such as Aravaipa Canyon, Hassayampa River, Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, Muleshoe Ranch and Hart Prairie. Find out more at: <http://www.nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/arizona/preserves/>
- Visit a botanical garden. The University of Arizona’s Boyce Thompson Arboretum is an outstanding facility. Visit the website at: <http://ag.arizona.edu/bta/>
- Visit a state park. Arizona has many outstanding parks open to the public.
- Volunteer to work on trails or walking paths.
- Spend time at a playground.
- Find and explore a stream or wetland area.
- Star gaze at night by identifying constellations
- Go for a walk in your neighborhood.
- Build a bird house or bird feeder and put it up in your yard. Keep it filled with seeds.
- Put out a hummingbird feeder and observe the different birds who visit.

You can probably think of other ways to get your family and friends outside exploring. The key is to simply “get outside”—off the computer, away from the television, and re-discovering the natural places and wild spaces hidden away around the area where you live. You’ll be surprised about what you’ll find.

People who spend time outdoors are healthier, happier, do better in school, and are emotionally stronger. In addition, they can become advocates for open spaces. The benefits are clear. If we can re-connect each generation to the natural world, then we will not have to be concerned about which child becomes “the last child” who experiences the sense of wonder and connection that we experienced as we played outdoors as children. The world still needs tree houses and secret places.

