

LEAVE NO CHILD INSIDE

To create a better future for our children, let's help them connect with their wild roots

By Marilyn Wyzga

In the past few decades, the way children understand and experience nature has changed dramatically. A child today can tell you about the whales in the ocean,



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dinosaurs of the past, or trees in the rain forest, but not about what lives and grows in his or her backyard. While today's kids are aware of the global threats to the environment, their own physical contact with nature is fading.

What can we do to help reconnect children with the outdoors? For one thing, say experts, revive recess. Roughly 40% of school districts have either eliminated recess or are considering cutting it. Some schools that still offer recess have "dumbed down" the playground by, for instance, banning running games. Without these activities that increase heart rates and improve hand-eye coordination, it's easy to see why 17% of children are overweight.

Schools that soften the schoolyard or limit children's engagement with the outdoors often have concerns about liability. We can accommodate that concern by creating safe zones for nature exploration. We can also weave nature experiences into our classrooms and create or expand programs to introduce youth to the outdoors.

David Sobel of Antioch New England University says schools are unintentionally spreading fear of the natural world and ecological problems. Children are savvy to current environmental issues like global warming, Sobel notes. But lacking direct



experience with the outdoors, they begin to associate nature with fear and disaster, rather than discovery, joy and wonder.

A complete environmental curriculum, by contrast, engages children directly in nature while using traditional methods and current technologies to teach subject matter in the classroom. Some schools cut recess so children will have more time to study for tests. Louv argues that nature "does not steal time, it amplifies it." Getting acquainted with nature inspires creativity and, studies show, actually improves test scores. Students who have classes outdoors improve their grade-point averages, as well as their skills in critical thinking and decision-making, and tend to be more cooperative, more engaged in the classroom and more open to conflict resolution.

Taking It to the Streets

New Hampshire may be largely rural, but the problem of nature-deficit disorder is not limited to urban areas, as naturalist Ruth Smith found when she ran an after-school program in rural Hopkinton. "Even kids who said they liked being outdoors had

Activities Related to Articles in This Issue

Project Learning Tree Suggests:

In *School Yard Safari*, students identify signs of animals living in the school yard and describe ways that the school environment provides suitable habitat for animals living there.

Field, Forest and Stream is an inquiry-based field investigation in which students explore relationships between non-living (abiotic) and living (biotic) components in three ecosystems commonly found at or near a school.

In more urban areas, *Are Vacant Lots Vacant?* is a great activity involving a field

investigation in which students observe vacant lots and begin to discover that many plants and animals can thrive there.

Project WET suggests:

In *Thirsty Plants*, students go outdoors and collect data to learn about transpiration.


In *Stream Sense*, students observe a local stream and discover there is much more to it than it may first seem.

Students explore their school grounds and collect data to understand how water flows through it in a *Rainy Day Hike*.

Project WILD suggests:

In *Water Canaries* (WILD Aquatic), students investigate a stream or pond using sampling techniques and learn to identify common invertebrates.

Students hone their observation skills in *Learning to Look, Looking to See*, first by writing what they have observed in a familiar setting, then by practicing in an unfamiliar outdoor setting.

By embarking on an outdoor treasure hunt, students search for evidence of wildlife in *Microtrek Treasure Hunt*. 

little personal experience and lacked basic skills like how to navigate a trail," she noted. Once out and about, Smith observed that the thing the kids most enjoyed was outdoor play in nature – building forts, dams and tree houses.

Even in urban and suburban areas, nature is closer than you might think. Louv recommends taking advantage of "nearby nature" – the ravine behind your house, or the little woods at the end of the cul-de-sac. Adults expect nature to be so much bigger, but to a child, that ravine is a universe. Protecting those little spaces in cities and suburbs is a step in the right direction.

Still, the No. 1 reason parents give for limiting their children's play outdoors is fear of "stranger danger." At a talk by David Sobel in Hancock, a local parent observed, "playing in the backyard is not safe," even in their small, rural town. Ironically, the statistics on abductions suggest almost all are by family members, and the number of abductions has been going down for about a decade; kids are safer outside the home than at any time since the 1970s.

We think of the outdoors as being inherently risky, but indoor dwelling comes with its own risks for children. Pediatricians say they're not treating very many broken bones anymore. Rather, they are seeing repetitive-stress injuries, childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and the effects of indoor air pollution. Other disturbing risks associated with the online neighborhood are emerging as kids socialize in a virtual world



instead of playing outside. We seem to have traded the perceived dangers lurking in nature for the potentially more threatening and permanent impacts of sitting in front of the television or computer.

We Need Nature

Biologically, humans are still hunters and gatherers. The evolutionary remnants of these past experiences are hard-wired into

Children have a natural curiosity about living things that turn up under leaves, rocks or logs.

our nervous system, says zoologist Gordon Orians. Renowned naturalist E.O. Wilson takes it a step further, saying that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world, a biologically based need essential to our development as individuals. Both scientists' work suggests a genuine physical need for nature, one that, in modern humans of all ages, is simply no longer fulfilled.

Think back to your childhood. If you're over thirty, you likely spent time in the outdoors uninhibited – playing, making forts, climbing trees, going fishing, getting dirty. What would our lives have been like without those times?

As teachers, parents, grandparents and role models, we can spend more time in nature with children. The bonus is, when we give children the gift of nature, we gain all the same benefits they do – the stress reduction, the longer attention span, the renewed sense of wonder. We need to be passionate about re-connecting kids with nature.

Passion, Louv writes, is "the long-distance fuel for the struggle to save what is left of our natural heritage..."

Louv's encouragement to grownups is simple and easily achieved: Take the kids outside.

Checklist for Planning an Outdoor Experience

Choose the activity

- Decide what you will teach.
- What are your objectives?

Check out the site

- Do the regulations of the area permit the activities you want to do?
- Is the site an appropriate size?
- Are there clear-cut boundaries that your students will respect as their "outer limits?"
- Are restroom and first aid facilities accessible?
- Are there any potential safety hazards? Can they be avoided?

Plan the activity

- Write out the lesson plan.
- Review every step.
- Estimate how much time you will spend.
- Make a complete list of materials you will need.
- Tell students what to wear.
- Send out permission slips.

Prepare your students

- Know their current knowledge level.
- Review the planned activities with the class.
- Make clear the purpose of the trip
- Give as many instructions as possible before going outdoors.