

The Daily Parent

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

OUTDOOR PLAY EVERY DAY

Children And Nature

When you think about it, for tens of thousands of years children spent much of their childhood playing or working in natural settings. Within the space of two or three decades in Western society, particularly in the United States, that's in danger of ending.

—Richard Louv, 2006



and computers take up more time. Your child is probably involved in several organized activities. The media is constantly telling you that things like the ticks, mosquitoes, polluted water, and strangers make the outside a dangerous place. Your child care provider may have limited outdoor space for outdoor play.

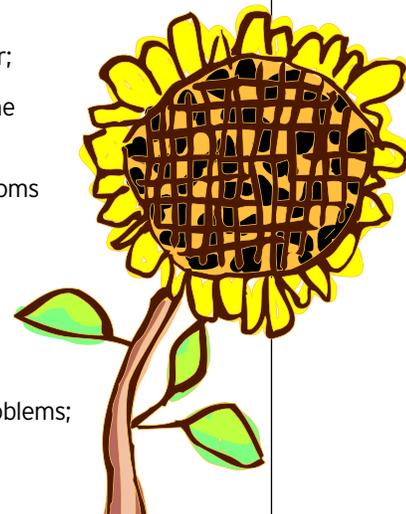
Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, uses the term, "nature-deficit disorder" to describe what happens to young people who are disconnected from their natural world. He ties this lack of unstructured outside time to depression, attention disorders, and rises in obesity.

There are many reasons why your child is spending less time outdoors than you did. There are fewer green spaces and natural environments. More homes and child care programs have air conditioning. Television

Outdoor Time Is Important

We are learning that it is important for children to spend time outdoors without a planned agenda. Children who regularly spend unstructured time outdoors are more likely to:

- ▶ Become fitter and leaner;
- ▶ Develop stronger immune systems;
- ▶ Experience fewer symptoms of ADD and ADHD;
- ▶ Play more creatively and have more active imaginations;
- ▶ Learn how to handle challenges and solve problems;



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- ▶ Experience how things grow, mature, and die;
- ▶ Develop a sense of wonder and research;
- ▶ Apply science and math principles to real world situations; and
- ▶ Have greater respect for themselves, for others, and for the environment.

Encourage Your Child's Outdoor Play

From your child's infancy on, plan time every day for unstructured outside play. Keep it simple and fun. Start in your backyard and then move to your neighborhood and beyond. Encourage your child to explore with all the senses: hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. After your child is successful with simpler activities, add new and more complex challenges.

Explore in your back yard:

- ▶ Look for bugs, birds, trees, and wildflowers.
- ▶ Make mud pies. Peek under rocks. Splash through puddles. Climb trees. Build snow men. Rake leaves and jump in them. Watch the stars and find constellations. Find quiet places to read and reflect.
- ▶ Plant easy-to-grow vegetables and flowers in a small garden or wooden planter box. Experience seed planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting.
- ▶ Hang a bird feeder. Get a bird guide and record which birds visit the feeder.
- ▶ Start a collection of stones, shells, leaves, or bugs.
- ▶ Mark off a small square of ground. Have your child draw or write about what is in the square. Periodically have your child record what is new or different.

Investigate your neighborhood:

- ▶ Help your child pack an explorer's kit. Include items such as a magnifying glass, binoculars, plastic bags and containers for collecting, field guides, notebook and pencil, camera, water bottle, snack, sunscreen, bug repellent, band-aids, blanket/tarp for sitting on the ground or building forts, and a cell phone.
- ▶ Go for a walk. Visit the park. Allow time to run and explore.
- ▶ Play by the creek. Go sledding. Build sand castles.
- ▶ Shop at a farmers' market.
- ▶ Visit a nature center.
- ▶ Visit local farms and orchards.

Bring nature inside your home

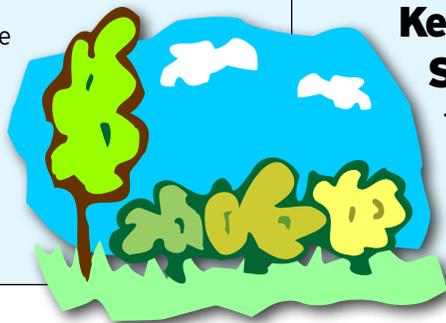
- ▶ Get nature guides. Learn to identify trees, leaves, birds, wild flowers, and shells.
- ▶ Sing songs and choose stories for your child that feature plants and animals.
- ▶ Help your child see how food goes from the garden to the table.

Volunteer

- ▶ Support more natural settings such as grass and rocks at your local playground.
- ▶ Work with groups that beautify neighborhoods and protect natural settings.
- ▶ Join hiking, birding, or gardening clubs.
- ▶ Help your child care provider create naturalistic outdoor environments. Encourage your provider to allow unstructured outdoor play time.

Keep Your Child Safe Outdoors

There are several things you can do to keep your child safe outdoors.



Dress suitably.

- ▶ In warm weather, clothing should be light-colored, lightweight, and absorbent.
- ▶ In cold weather, clothing should be layered and dry. Check fingers, toes, and ears for normal color and warmth at least every 15 minutes.
- ▶ Wear long-sleeved shirts and pants tucked into socks for visits to the woods.
- ▶ Wear boots for playing in water/creeks.

Protect your child and yourself from the sun.

- ▶ Play in the shade.
- ▶ Wear hats and protective clothing when playing outdoors between the hours of 10 AM and 2 PM.
- ▶ Use sunscreen with UVB-ray and UVA-ray protection of SPF-15 or higher. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before exposure to the sun and every two hours while in the sun. Talk to your doctor before using sunscreen on an infant less than 6 months old.

Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.

Treat unknown plants with respect and avoid poisonous plants. MedlinePlus has information about poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac online at www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/poisonivyoakandsumac.html.

Stay inside during unhealthy weather.

- ▶ Check with your local weather station about air quality index levels.
- ▶ Play indoors if the wind chill is at or below 15 degrees °F or the heat index is at or above 90 degrees °F.

Wash exposed skin when you and your child come inside.

Prevent or treat bug bites.

- ▶ Wear long sleeve shirts when you are in the woods or in weeds. Tuck pants into socks. Wear sturdy shoes.

- ▶ Use Insect repellent to repel biting pests such as mosquitoes and ticks. Apply it primarily to clothes and use it sparingly on exposed skin. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has information about use of the insect repellent DEET online at www.epa.gov/opp00001/factsheets/chemicals/deet.htm.
- ▶ Check yourself, your child, other family members, and pets every two to three hours for ticks. The Illinois Department of Health has information about prevention and control of common ticks online at www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/pccommonticks.htm.

Protect your child from strangers.

- ▶ Teach your child to always go out with a buddy.
- ▶ Have your child check in with you regularly in person or by cell phone.
- ▶ Practice the “what if” game. “What would you do if someone was following you? . . . if you were lost? . . . if someone offered you candy?”
- ▶ Tell your child about “safe homes” to go to if something doesn’t feel right.

For More Information

Your Local Department of Parks and Recreation has information about local parks, nature centers, classes, and camps.

Your Local Library offers a wealth of material on how to choose books about nature that will interest your child and encourage exploring outside.

Audubon Society, www.audubon.org, has an education section with ideas for crafts, activities, and trips for families and teachers.

Children and Nature Network, www.childrenandnature.org, has resources about involving children with nature for parents, educators, and health-care providers.

Children And Nature

National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Beyond the Journal*. January 2008. Teaching and Learning about the Natural World, <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200801/default.asp>, offers ideas, practical strategies, and book suggestions about giving children opportunities to explore, appreciate, and value the natural world.

National Wildlife Federation, Green Hour®, www.greenhour.org, recommends that parents give their kids a "Green Hour" every day - a time for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world. The Green Hour® website provides parents with information, tools, and inspiration to get children outside to learn, explore, and share.

No Child Left Inside Coalition, www.cbf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=act_sub_actioncenter_federal_NCLB, promotes ways to encourage kids to experience nature and learn about the environment. It supports federal funding for outdoor learning activities and high-quality environmental education.

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