

This month for the first time, I am using my column to recommend to you a great new book and to share with you the powerful interests its subject raised for me. I hope my brief review will pique your own interest to consider how to help reverse the dangerous disconnection between children and nature – dangerous for children’s health, for their growth and development and for their opportunities, over time, to preserve a healthy society. The book also introduced me to some hopeful examples of personal efforts and programs that are currently working to restore the intimate lessons of nature that can help instill in children a deep sense of security, identity, place, purpose and caring. Please let me hear from you with your personal reflections and creative suggestions.

Nature-Deficit Disorder: A Matter of Life and Health



“Our children are the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world,” warns Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, published in paperback in 2006 by Algonquin Books. Sure they play on ball fields, skate through streets and manicured parks, learn about the Amazon rain forest and, on their computer screens and televisions, play in the heavens and get lost in the jungle. Relatively few children today, however, spend much time aimlessly lying in the grass watching clouds pass overhead, wander free and safely out of sight of home or town, observe and collect tiny creatures (remember lightning bugs?), breathe in the aroma of fresh air, listen for sounds in the dark, learn the social behavior of wildlife or the signs of an immanent turn in weather.

Why should we care about such changes in the experience children have with nature? An increasing body of science and public concern claims that we had better reverse this trend if we are to endow our children with necessary skills to steward their own lifespan development, to promote community health, to guide the course of civilization and to safeguard the future of life on earth. It’s amazing to learn how much natural exploration builds a child’s intellectual abilities, can prevent or treat attention deficits and can promote the development of personal responsibility, independence and relationship skills.

These are the subjects of Louv's compelling appeal as detailed in his wonderful new book. The 300 pages turn as quickly as did the patch of woods your community just converted to roads, condos or Walmarts. Louv, a parent and journalist, has studied a growing body of research and interviewed leaders in the fields of environmental science, child psychology, community planning, health care and spirituality. The book's chapters first develop the case for concern on behalf of children's mental, physical and spiritual health. Subsequent sections account for the change in children's relationship with nature and cite a number of hopeful programs, some educational, others community-centered and even faith-based, that, by reuniting children with the natural joy of discovery, are beginning to counter the potentially devastating consequences of losing contact with the natural world. The book highlights practices that hold great promise, from schools that use nature as the anchor for learning all the academic subjects to terrific ideas each of us can try when we are spending time with a child. The author's own young son contributes one of the most endearing pieces of advice for adults:

Fishing Tips for Parents from Matthew Louv (age 12):

1. Fish with your kid.
2. Let your kids go fishing, even if you don't want to take them.
3. Let your kids buy supplies and tackle. That's half the fun of fishing.
4. If your kids are young, take them to a place where fish are easy to catch and are small.
5. Let kids fish as long as they want. Let them get obsessed.
6. Let the kids go off and do their own thing. It can get to be incredibly annoying and/or frustrating if there's an adult standing over them barking orders.
7. At least pretend to act excited when your kid catches a fish. It can quickly ruin a day of fishing if the kid feels you don't want to be there, and he's just dragging you down.
8. If you know how to fish, don't give your kid too much unsolicited advice, although it can be helpful if the kid is young.
9. Let your kid teach you how to fish; participate in the fishing. This can be quality bonding time.
10. Remember that fishing and spending time with family is just as, or more important than, homework.
11. Have fun; that's the entire point of going fishing in the first place.
12. And whatever you do, DON'T LET YOUR KID THROW ROCKS IN THE WATER!

Here's the bottom-line message: early and enduring intimacy with nature may lay the developmental base for human beings to become more caring people, better scientists, moral politicians, community servants and devoted friends. For all of us who raise or advise children and families, who care about the social health of communities and who recognize that time is short and responsibility for the well-being of children is both personal and shared, this instructive and inspiring book will become one of your most trusted resources. Read it, share it and discuss it with your friends, colleagues and loved ones. Send it to your local city planners and lawmakers. Then go out and introduce some children to the magical mysteries and eternal truths of the nature we share with all living beings, the nature that produces life and shapes our destinies, the nature we must safeguard for our sake and for all time. You couldn't do our kids and their future a greater favor.