

Kids Belong Outdoors

I have a question for people of a certain age: do you remember your childhood? Do you remember growing up before the invention of computers, video games and cell phones? When playing outside was the norm, not the exception? When we were not paranoid about germs, getting dirty or playing by ourselves outside, worried about the creepy stranger lurking around the corner? When you used your own imagination and creativity to come up with games and activities?

I do. I remember the days when I was ushered out the door first thing in the morning, only returning home in time for dinner. I also remember the joy and wonder I felt spending the day roaming the woods behind my house, splashing in the creek and yes, talking to the animals. Those woods were my playground. There were vines to swing on, a pond to explore, rocks to collect and trees to climb. I felt a connection to the world around me, as well as a sense of peace knowing that as long as the water still flowed in the creek and the birds sang in the trees, all was right with the world. Back then, no child wanted to stay inside and in fact, being sent to your room was the ultimate punishment!

Today's children are growing up in a completely different world than you and I did, a world filled with mesmerizing electronic devices. Parents plop their kids in front of the television for hours on end; a convenient and cheap babysitter. Kids are fixated on video games instead of reality. They have cell phones from a young age. They carry these phones with them everywhere, yet they don't actually talk to one another, they text. Instead of basking in the sunlight, they are indoors, endlessly staring at a computer screen. Being sent to one's room is no longer a punishment because that's where all the fun is.

Today's children are so electronically connected that they have become emotionally disconnected- from one another and from nature. They don't venture outdoors and engage their senses. They no longer use their imaginations; they no longer have to think very hard when it comes to problem solving. Why should they? There is an app for everything!

Because of this lack of outdoor time, children are suffering from what has become known as nature-deficit disorder, the phrase coined by Richard Louv in his groundbreaking book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder". Children today are not just missing out on the fun we had as kids, their lack of a connection to the outdoors is affecting them in ways that are far more sinister. Childhood obesity is alarmingly on the rise, doubling in the last two decades, while cases of ADHD are increasing in number and the use of antidepressants in pediatric patients has risen sharply.

In addition to these frightening statistics, there are other more positive reasons why you should encourage your child to play outdoors. For example, children who have access to the outdoors are healthier, more focused and perform better in school. According to a March 2010 survey of nearly 2,000 educators by the National Wildlife Federation, "78 percent feel students who spend regular time in unstructured outdoor play are better able to concentrate, and 75 percent feel students who spend regular time outdoors are more creative and better problem solvers. Studies confirm access to nature in an educational setting has a positive impact on student focus and learning by improving attentiveness, test scores and performance."

Other studies show that children who play outside have better self-esteem, enhanced brain development, are more creative and curious, and possess a sense of connectedness to the environment, as well as their communities. In addition, children who are not glued to electronic devices every spare minute of the day are better communicators, more poised and can relate to others on a much more compassionate level. The bottom line is that exposure to the outdoors is vital in the development of a healthy, smart and well rounded child.

What can we do about nature-deficit disorder? Raising a child really does take a village, and as parents juggle demanding careers with the needs of their children, it is vital that we provide options that will re-connect kids to a world that frankly, is a mystery to them. We need to instill in children that same sense of wonder, freedom and appreciation for nature that we experienced as children. We need to provide them with opportunities to explore, expand and engage.

If you are a parent, there is much you can do. Bring your child to a park, nature preserve or refuge. Take your child to an outdoor activity offered by a nature center or environmental organization. Start them young: if you have an infant, sit them down in the grass, let them learn to feel comfortable outdoors. Preschoolers can be taken for walks, and encouraged to gather up treasures such as sticks, rocks and pine cones. Point the birds out to them, and exclaim with them over the beauty of these avian gems. As your child gets older, suggest they keep a nature journal, tracking the wonderful things they see in their adventures. Take your child out birding with you, making sure that they have the best possible optics they can handle for their age. Teach them about the wonders of our feathered friends at an early age, and when they are old enough to understand, encourage them to practice conservation, explaining that their efforts matter and do make a difference.

Remember your days of staying outside for hours on end and how much fun it was? Why not pass that gift down to your child? For their mental, physical and emotional health...children belong outdoors. And by all means, if your youngsters want to talk to the animals, let them.

Stella Miller is president of the Huntington-Oyster Bay Audubon Society and grew up roaming the woods behind her home, splashing in the creek, exploring the ponds, and yes, talking to the animals. For ideas on how to connect your child to nature, please visit: <http://www.hobaudubon.org/parentscorner/>