

Every Child Outdoors - The Movement in Tennessee

By Vera Vollbrecht

Close your eyes for a moment and think of a significant childhood experience you had in the outdoors. Were you alone, or did you share this experience with a parent, grandparent, or other adult? Was it a one-time event or was it a place you visited repeatedly? Are you still able to recreate the sights, smells, and sounds of the experience in your mind today?



If you are like many adults, remembering time in nature as a child came easily to you. It's quite possible you have several significant memories of being outdoors, enjoying activities like fishing, camping, visiting a farm, or simply exploring nature and playing on your own. You may also remember an adult telling you to "go outside and play!" expecting that you wouldn't come home until dark.

Most people intuitively understand that being outdoors is fundamentally good for children, essential for their mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Unfortunately, many of today's children may not be having the same kinds of outdoor experiences that were once commonplace. These kids are suffering from what is called "Nature Deficit Disorder," a syndrome described by author Richard Louv in the book *Last Child in the Woods*. Published in 2004, this international bestseller examines how and why children are spending less time outdoors and in nature than any generation in human history, and the dramatic negative effects this may have on an entire generation.

The major contributors to nature deficit are not surprising; the increased use of electronic media; fear of strangers; limited access to greenspace; liability; overscheduled kids; and parents' fear of stings and bites are often cited as causes of the problem. Here are some startling facts about children's lives in the 21st century:

- » Today's kids spend an average of 6.5 hours daily in front of a "screen," playing a video game, watching TV, surfing the Internet, or texting friends.
- » Childhood obesity has doubled over the past 20 years; adolescent obesity has tripled.
- » In 2009 many parents are afraid to let children go outdoors because of a fear that they'll be kidnapped or harmed, when actually crime against children has decreased over the past 20 years.
- » Many children today live in areas where there are no parks or safe outdoor spaces within walking distance from where they live, or access to the outdoors is restricted by high density traffic.
- » Kids today often have very little free, unstructured time, between time in school and after-school sports, music lessons, homework time, and other extra-curricular activities.

The effects of the changes in kids' lifestyles can be directly linked with the mental and physical health of children today. Sedentary lifestyles primarily spent inside may well be one cause of the dramatic increase in childhood obesity. In a time during which kids have tight schedules full of structured activities, the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that children spend 60 minutes each day engaged in unstructured playtime. And while video and Internet images of nature are easily accessed, youth are missing out on direct experiences in the outdoors.

The identification of these trends in the lives of 21st century children has led to a growing movement among parents, teachers, health care professionals, environmentalists, and even youth themselves. Known across the country by different names such as "No Child Left Inside," or "Get Outdoors," the common goal is understood - children need time outdoors, connecting with and exploring the natural world. Hundreds of organizations have emerged across the country and are connected by the Children and Nature Network, a non-profit organization started by Richard Louv that is "building a movement to reconnect children and nature" (www.childrenandnature.org).

Last November, a group of Tennesseans engaged in the movement came together to form a statewide coalition called Every Child Outdoors – Tennessee (ECO –TN) through a stakeholder meeting sponsored and facilitated by the National Wildlife Federation. The coalition is made up of teachers,

naturalists, school health workers, landscape architects, representatives of environmental groups, and private citizens, and has received formal support and endorsement from over 100 national, state, and local groups including the Tennessee Departments of Education, Health, and Environment and Conservation and the Tennessee Wildlife Federation. ECO-TN's mission is to promote and support opportunities that encourage children to engage with and experience the outdoors. This group has been hard at work this year drafting a Tennessee Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and working on spreading the word about nature deficit disorder and the importance of children spending time outdoors.

Outside of ECO-TN, many people have joined the Every Child Outdoors movement by starting a family nature club. Fresh Air for Families, a nature club in the greater Nashville area, organizes monthly nature hikes for parents and kids excited about spending time outdoors. Nature playgrounds, alternatives to traditional playgrounds, are also popping up at preschools, churches, and nature centers. These play areas are designated as a safe place for kids to engage in unstructured outdoor play, providing a place to dig in the dirt, make mud pies, and enjoy nature.

Significant, recurring experiences in nature have been linked to an adult's development of an environmental ethic. This is especially true if as a child, these experiences were facilitated and fostered by an adult mentor. Whether a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or friend, everyone has a child in their life with whom they can share their love and wonder of nature, and, now more than any other time in human history it is imperative that children spend time outdoors.

To learn more about this topic, look for the books *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard. Louv, published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, N.C., in 2008 and *Connecting Today's Kids with Nature: A Policy Action*