HOW TO GROW AN OUTDOOR KID

BY LEA BOYD

IF YOU'RE A MOM OR A DAD, A GRANDPARENT, OR JUST ABOUT ANY ADULT WITH A STANDARD-SIZED SERVING OF COMMON SENSE, YOU KNOW THAT GETTING KIDS OUTSIDE IN NATURE IS IMPORTANT. You know that behind those screens their gray matter is congealing instead of popping and fizzing with new connections. But when did our "go out and play" culture get strangled by powercords and pixels? Why is it critical we diagnose that problem and prescribe our kids a cure?

Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods," coined the term Nature Deficit Disorder nearly a decade ago in response to a growing body of evidence indicating that children who don't spend time in nature suffer for it in many ways—cogni-

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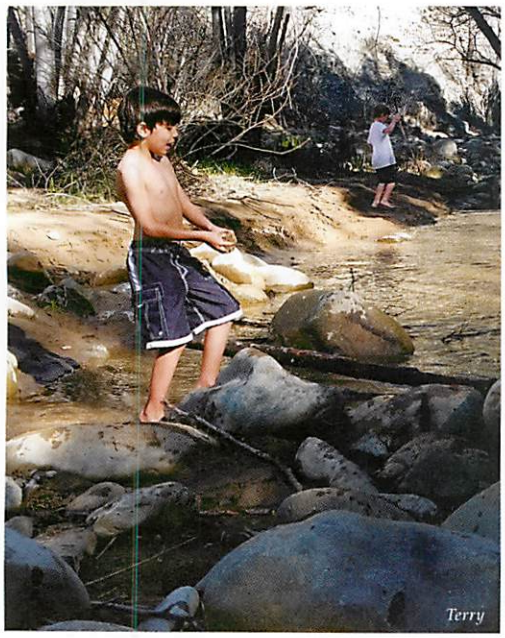
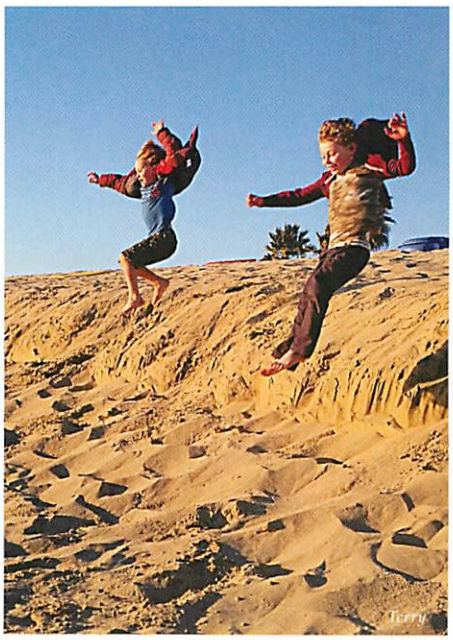




tive, physical, emotional. Since then, a movement to "leave no child inside" has gained momentum in the fight to reconnect children and nature.

Over the last several thousand years, humans have gradually moved more and more life indoors. In the last 30 years, however, a high speed disconnection to nature has taken place as a multitude of powerful forces pulled and pushed kids inside.

Fear is one such force. Fueled by media hype and social pressure, parents are now ever wary of kidnapping and other crimes and draw up play boundaries accordingly. The reality, however, tends to be less scary than perception. Crime is down overall in the United States, and only 115 of the 800,000 children reported "missing" each year are snatched by a stranger, according to the Department of Justice. The vast majority of missing children are teenage runaways who return home within 24 hours.

Dan Fontaine, Executive Director of the Wilderness Youth Project, points to parental fear and "stranger danger" as a major factor reducing kids' connection to nature. His childhood was marked by the autonomy to roam and explore, a freedom few children enjoy today. Without that repeated exposure to nature, kids lack comfort in the wild and develop what researchers are calling "ecophobia," fear of nature and the outdoors.

"I don't think the world has actually changed as much as our relationship with it has changed," Fontaine says.

Even when parents are willing to give their children longer leashes, there is less nature within reach. Rampant development has left fewer wild places to explore, and there is loads more technology to lure kids inside. A 2010 study by Kaiser Family Foundation found that 8- to 18-year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media, per day. Navigating one's neighborhood has become a lot less comfortable for children than navigating an iPad.

"Much of society no longer sees time spent in the natural world and independent, imaginary play as 'enrichment,'" says Louv. "Technology now dominates almost every aspect of our lives. Technology is not, in itself, the enemy; but our lack of balance is lethal."

A nationwide poll conducted in 2015 by The Nature Conservancy found that

Claudia Craig

the vast majority of today's kids use a computer, watch TV or play video games on a daily basis, but only about 10 percent say they are spending time outdoors every day.

Neighborhood attitudes have influenced the trend toward indoor childhoods as well. Louv notes that residential communities are often governed by homeowners associations that do not take kindly to children logging outdoor experiences. "One woman told me her community association banned chalk drawing on the sidewalks. Just try to put up a basketball hoop in some of these neighborhoods, let alone let the kids build a fort or treehouse in the field beyond the cul de sac," he says.

LEAVE NO CHILD INSIDE

A generation ago, kids connected with nature simply because mom shooed them outside the house and told them to come back when the streets lights turned on. Parents didn't calculate the value of climbing trees, catching tadpoles or trampling a path through the vacant lot. They took for granted the benefits of spending time outside because kids did so much of it.

Not so much today.

"There is growing evidence that indicates direct exposure to nature is essential for children's physical and emotional health, improving their cognitive abilities and resistance to negative stresses and depression," states Martha Driessnack in the Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing.

Inactivity is now a national pandemic, and new research links those hours upon hours sitting on the couch with shorter lifespans. As childhood has been shoved between four walls, obesity rates have climbed, along with other health issues associated with sedentary lifestyles.

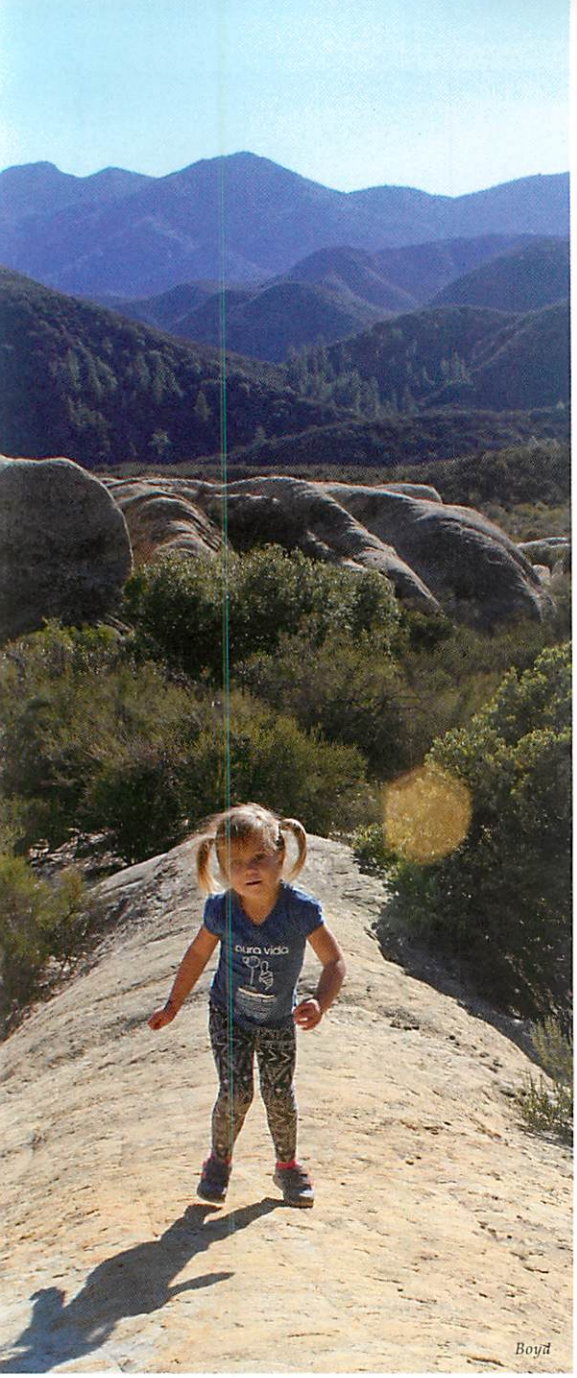
And even kids who are scheduled from dawn to dusk with physical activities like soccer and tae kwon do, are missing out on the benefits of unstructured outdoor play. Recent studies indicate that time in nature improves academic success, particularly for children with challenges like attention deficit disorders.

Heather King, director of the nature education program Ventura Wild, says that she sees kids with academic challenges undergo transformations in nature-based programs. "Those are the kids who oftentimes really blossom outdoors. They can really feel powerful outside," she says.

New data suggests that greening our schools may be one of the most cost-effective ways to raise student test scores. King witnesses what science is just starting to quantify: spending time outside improves children's capabilities back inside the classroom. Being in nature improves academics by increasing innate curiosity and giving children exposure to hands-on science and problem solving, she says.

Putting the child back in the wild may also be critical for the long-term preservation of open spaces. Fighting for public lands and electing leaders who do the same requires a love for wilderness and an understanding of its importance.

A 2012 review published in the Oxford Handbook of Environmental and Conservation Psychology synthesized over 100 studies related to nature exploration in youth. The authors found first and foremost that "essentially every type of environmental behavior, from recycling to environmental careers, has been linked by research to a childhood spent playing in nature. Thus, a sustainable world in which people take care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of the natural environment is predicated on children having regular access to direct experiences in nature."

Justin Canty, Director of Education at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, says that children visiting the museum's Backyard, a creekside space designed for nature play, often arrive apprehensive and full of questions like, "Is a snake going to jump out and bite me?" Then they begin to explore. They have free rein to splash in the creek, build structures from bamboo poles, dig for insects in a mulch pile and visit the Clubhouse where they're encouraged to touch animal skins, bones and even live frogs and snakes. "As they are exposed to these things, their ecophobia is reduced," Canty says.

Providing regular experiences in nature takes work on the part of parents. Children accustomed to zombying out in front of a screen may be reluctant to up their outdoor time, but the benefits are worth the parental prodding. "One thing to keep in mind," Louv says, "people seldom look back on their childhoods and recall the best day they ever spent watching TV."

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods," Dan Fontaine, Executive Director of the Wilderness Project, Heather King, Executive Director of Ventura Wild, and Justin Canty of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum weigh in on how to grow an outdoor kid.

JUST DO IT. Rather than worrying too much about providing the perfect nature experience for children, Fontaine says, just get kids outside. Over thinking it can add another hurdle to doing it.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE. "When parents rediscover their sense of wonder, so do most kids," Louv says.

DON'T BE SCARED. Helicopter parents can hinder their children's abilities to connect with nature and build self-confidence. "Do whatever you can to manage your own sense of fear," Fontaine advises.

KEEP AT IT. There's no prescription for precisely how much time kids should spend exploring outside, but Louv says, "A rule of thumb is that some experience in nature is better than none, and more is better than some."

SPIN IT. If kids are unmotivated to spend time outside, use language that excites. King tells children, "We're going exploring," "We're going on an adventure," or "Let's go find treasures."

ASK, DON'T TELL. Canty emphasizes that asking questions rather than giving information helps to engage children and cultivate natural curiosity and higher level thinking.

NEED HELP?

No matter how much time and energy parents are able to dedicate to outdoor excursions with their children, participating in outdoor education programs can still offer huge benefits. Over the last couple decades, several organizations have popped up in the Tri-Counties to provide nature-based experiences for a wide range of ages.

Outside Now, San Luis Obispo, outsidenow.org
Nature Track, Santa Ynez, naturetrack.org
Wilderness Youth Project, Santa Barbara, wyp.org
Wild Roots, Santa Barbara, wildrootsschool.org
Ventura Wild, Ventura, venturawild.com