



Education

Steiny: Putting the nature back in the nurture of our children

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Family physicians don't see as many broken bones among children as they did in the days when kids were sent "outside to play."

Now they see computer-related repetitive motion injuries. The free-for-all, unstructured play — which did occasionally result in a broken bone back when we were shooed outdoors — has been replaced by organized activities run by people keenly aware of liability issues. Nearly gone are gaggles of kids bounding around the neighborhood or into the local woods — where any is left — free to explore the world as Mother Nature made it.

Richard Louv, author of *The Last Child in the Woods*, says this generation of children suffers from "nature-deficit disorder." Yes, the medicalized label is obnoxious, but he's dead on the money that most modern kids rarely experience the intriguing, sensuous magic of nature in the raw.

On a recent dark and stormy night, Louv's message drew more than 400 people to the Community College of Rhode Island, one stop in his whirlwind tour of multiple cities. People are hungry to hear him talk about the harmful effects of our kids' alienation from nature, and about the joys and practical benefits, for all of us, of just spending a lot more time outside with weather, woods, gardens and ponds. He's collected much research to support his cause.

For example, on average, kids spend 44 hours a week plugged into electronic gadgets. Bike sales have dropped by a third in a generation. Childhood obesity is now out of control. Attendance at national parks has plummeted. Since the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind act passed, 40 percent of U.S. schools have cut or completely eliminated recess. And, he sighs, "Field trips are a thing of the past."

Furthermore, "Parents are scared to death of stranger danger, and nature is a stranger. When we don't let them get outside much, we're setting them up to fear the outdoors."

Louv was mid-sentence when an irate leader of a Girl Scout troop in the audience interrupted to complain that the scout camp forbids the girls to climb trees or walk on logs. The girls in the troop with her nodded with insulted agreement.

Then a teacher piped up and said that her preschool forbids her to let the children touch fallen snow.

Louv shrugged, shook his head and put his hands up in surrender.

Most intriguing to me was his discussion of nature's effect on our brain's "executive function," which he

described as “the voice in your head.” I would add that executive function governs your ability to assimilate lots of different kinds of information, and to act or make choices as a result.

Louv said, “The best way to develop executive function is through imaginative, made-up games. But both independent play and nature have been disappearing. From Suzuki [music lessons] to soccer to the flip-down screen in the SUV so the kids can watch nature shows on the way to the play date, kids are dramatically split from nature. As a result, a 7-year-old today has the executive function of a 5-year-old in 1940.” One reason is that “on a playground, leaders tend to be the physically strongest. But in nature, leaders are the smartest because they are the ones making up the games.”

“If you really want to get into Harvard, go outside,” he intones.

However infuriating it is that test scores are the only metric that matters, getting kids into nature in fact improves achievement. And teachers who get outside with their kids experience far less burn-out.

He cites studies at the University of Illinois that show that the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder all but disappear when the kids have regular, sustained contact with the natural world. So Louv wonders, “What proportion of kids are on stimulants because we’ve radically changed childhood?”

But Louv notes bitterly that America provides little money for “nature deficit” sorts of research, largely because the money flows to the development of new drugs — to help control the effects of not letting kids run around and possibly break a leg.

For this reason, Louv is very excited that Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed and Maryland Rep. John Sarbanes submitted the “No Child Left Inside Act,” which passed the House on Sept. 19.

In a news release, Reed said the act appropriates \$100 million each year for five years “for environmental education to inspire the next generation of scientists and conservationists.” Reed called it “a smart investment in our children’s future and the future of our planet.” The victory in the House was largely symbolic, since environmental science will be folded in to the revision — or replacement — of the No Child Left Behind education law.

Still, to Louv, this legislative action means that “at the very least, nature has moved from nowhere near the stove to the front burner. I believe a better definition of our relationship to nature is emerging that will help children become happier, more joyous and smarter.”

Wouldn’t that be lovely.

Rhode Island’s Environmental Education Association would be happy to connect schools or families with “envi sci” opportunities. Contact Save the Bay, Audubon, Nature Conservancy, the University of Rhode Island Coastal Institute or the Roger Williams Park Zoo to get you started.

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