



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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August 12, 2009 – Connecting Children with Nature

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Today's children face many challenges. Everything from Attention Deficit Disorder to childhood obesity—even depression—all rarely found in children in the past, now seem all too common.

Yet successfully fighting off another new challenge may relieve some problems and provide unseen benefits. This challenge, dubbed “nature deficit disorder” by noted *Last Child in the Woods* author Richard Louv, is that children far too often do not go outside anymore. Instead, their time is spent inside, due to factors like TV and computers, lack of outdoor play areas, traffic, homework, and the fears their parents feel about stranger-danger.

What we have lost by giving in to these indoor distractions goes far beyond the cherished ponds, woods, or fields of our childhoods. We are losing the land itself, our feelings of connectedness to the land, and the imaginations and health of our children.

It should be obvious that children who play outside have increased physical activity and suffer less from obesity and other physical ailments. Less obvious are the enormous effects of immersing children in nature. Numerous studies have shown the impact to be pervasive. Decreases in ADD symptoms, obesity, diabetes, and stress, and increases in self-esteem, problem-solving, motivation to learn, and psychological well-being (especially in children undergoing the most stressful life events) have all been recorded. Oh, by the way, academic achievement improved as well, as much as 27 percent in science test scores, according to a California Department of Education study in 2005.

Some of the disconnect is due to how we build our communities, such as building car-centered societies in which we must drive, not walk, everywhere we want and need to go—or establishing covenants that virtually criminalize some outdoor play, like disallowing tree houses or building forts.

However, much of this disconnect can be attributed to parents who do not allow children to experience the natural world just outside their doors or show them how.

Instead of TV and video games, take young children outside. Then, as they grow older, don't just *let* them go outside, but instead encourage them to explore on their own or with friends. Take advantage of our community's amazing outdoor opportunities.

Places like Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, Millbrook Marsh Nature Center, ClearWater Conservancy, and our local state parks have preserved thousands of acres of land for you to enjoy. These groups and others, like the State College Bird Club, host a tremendously wide variety of outdoor programs in which kids can

explore and connect with nature. Camps, hikes, educational programs, field trips, and many contests and races are right here, just waiting for you.

Those are just the organized programs. Sometimes, it is better to simply let go of your worries and let your children be free to explore. What they experience on their own may do them more good than you realize.

You may find that they are calmer and happier—and finding new ways to feel good about themselves and the natural world in which we all live.

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