

Why Your Child Needs More Time Outside

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Written by Kathleen F. Miller

Does your child have "nature-deficit disorder"?

In his 2006 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv coined that phrase, and it's been inspiring discussion ever since. More than ever before, Louv says, children are out of touch with nature and outdoor play, instead staying inside, plugged in to television and other electronic gadgets. He links the "wired" nature of modern childhood to increases in obesity, attention deficit disorder (ADD) and depression.



John Chilkotowsky, program director for the Duvall-based Wilderness Awareness School,

says that if your child isn't spending time outside having unstructured, imaginative play, he or she could be paying the price physically, mentally and emotionally. "The causes are numerous," he says. "Overloaded schedules and academic pressures that don't allow time outside playing, video games, and the activities that are outside (like sports) are completely structured."

And Chilkotowsky points out that when kids study the environment at school, it may have an unintended negative effect. "It's most often not about their neighborhood or nature in their backyard," he says. "It is dealing with environmental issues of another place, generally information that is depressing and scary, which leads to less of a connection to their local place, and a potentially greater feeling of alienation from the outdoors."

Leave no child inside

Cheryl Charles is president of the Children and Nature Network, a nonprofit organization that encourages the reconnection of children with nature and outdoor play. Inspired by Louv's book, her organization last year launched the "Leave No Child Inside" campaign. Charles says there is a growing body of evidence to indicate the benefits of regular and unstructured opportunities for play outside, "including, and not limited to: peace of mind, creativity, cognitive flexibility, improved problem solving, self-esteem, self-discipline, improved school achievement and more," she says.

Irene Perler is the gardening teacher at Three Cedars School, a Waldorf school in Bellevue. She recalls spending much of her own Puget Sound-area childhood outdoors playing, but now, she says, things have changed. "The growth of population in urban areas means that houses are placed very closely together as real estate value is so high. Many homes do not have much yard to play outside in." And yet, she believes children still crave that

connection to nature. "Children want to connect with the warmth of their parents and friends, pets or the outdoor world. They need sensory experiences."

Perler says her classes, which are taught outside to the first- through eighth-graders at the school, give students a unique learning experience. She recalls her students stopping to watch an eagle float overhead and the quiet concentration of a group studying a plant as they drew it. These, she says, "are the golden treasures that students and I value. These are not to be found in a classroom."

A camp experience

John Chilkotowsky's Wilderness Awareness School offers outdoors programs year-round, including summer camps that reconnect children to nature. He says that getting more time outside is equally important for girls and boys. "Outdoor experiences are for everyone, and parents of girls have an opportunity to see their daughters' increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of their experiences in nature. As a parent with a young daughter, I am aware of the joyful effect of play in mud puddles, listening to and watching birds and in general being outside."

Apryl Brinkley is the site manager for the Pacific Science Center's Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center (MSEEC). Among the nature programs the center offers is an outdoor summer camp program for kids. She says that while the kids participating in the camps love the simple joys of getting dirty, being outside and finding new creatures and places to explore, the programs has important long-term goals. "The most immediate outcome goal we hope for is that they reflect back on their experience here as being positive and fun. If a child remembers that feeling, they are more apt to want to explore more of the outdoors that is all around them. It is with each new experience with nature that the possibility to grow in their empathy for things that live around them. And once a person has empathy for the natural world, a passion for it can grow and blossom into actions someday."

Writer and mother Kathleen F. Miller remembers her enchanted 1970s Northwest childhood camping, hiking and fishing on the Olympic Peninsula, and spending hours in her Bainbridge Island tree house.

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Where to get wild



Your local parks and parks department: Many local parks departments offer affordable outdoor play, exploring and education programs for families and children. Check your local park department's website.

Go for a hike or bike ride: If your kids are toddlers to kindergarten age, consider a flat but scenic trail, such as the Burke Gilman Trail or the Sammamish River Trail. Bring a plastic-coated bird watcher's guide (available at REI) and play "How many birds can we spot?" Older kids may enjoy biking these trails with you.

Summer Camps

Wilderness Awareness School, Duvall: The school offers day camps, overnight camps and teen expeditions. 425-788-1301

Pacific Science Center outdoor summer camps: The Pacific Science Center conducts four different themed camps each week all held at Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center in Bellevue. 206-443-2925

Sahale Summer Camp, Hood Canal: This is a weeklong overnight outdoor summer camp for 9- to 12-year-olds. Campers have fun while learning outdoor living skills. For 13- to 17-year-olds, the camp also offers a Junior Staff Training Program. 206 419-3477

IslandWood: This 225-acre outdoor learning center on Bainbridge Island offers year- round programs and summer camps, day camps and overnight camps for children and families. 206-855-4300

Travel Options

Camping: Pitching a tent is a time-honored Northwest tradition for outdoors fun. But prime public camp ground sites fill quickly. You need to plan your camping trip with a tent or RV and go online and register for a site before you leave for camp this summer. Washington State Parks offers a great reservation system online.

Cabins: Several resorts on the Olympic Peninsula offer "no frill" cabins in gorgeous locations. On the wild coast, the beachfront Quileute Oceanside Resort in La Push still has charming aging wood cabins that start at \$80 at night, and more deluxe oceanfront options, 800-487-1267. Iron Springs Resort in Copalis features cabins with historic charm and modern comforts starting at \$269 in the summer, ocean views and a long, sandy beach perfect for kids and dogs to play on, 800-380-7950. The Sol Duc Hot Springs Resort in the heart of Olympic National Park offers simple wood cabins starting at \$125 per night. Soak in hot springs or hike through ancient forests with fine dining at the resort's restaurant, 1-866-4SOLDUC.

Outdoor adventures in the Tri-Cities: The Tri-Cities area in Eastern Washington, made up of Kennewick, Pasco and Richland is a just one tank of gas trip away and offers 300 days of sunshine a year and an abundance of outdoor activities for families with kids of all ages. If camping is not your idea of a vacation, you can enjoy outdoor adventures during the day with your family and then return to one of the area's many hotels and relax by a pool. Bring your bikes or rent them from Greenies in Richland and bike on over 35-miles of riverfront trail and learn about the area's history and wildlife through trailside markers, rent a kayak from Columbia Kayak Adventures and safely explore the Columbia River with a guide, take a hot air balloon ride or play in one of many aquatic splash parks. Get more information and ideas on the Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau website or call 1-800-254-5824.

Doe Bay Resort, Orcas Island: Offers a menu of "back to nature" accommodations options, from houses and cabins with basic amenities, to yurts and domes with bedding, to some of the most beautiful camping sites in the islands. Doe Bay Resort is family friendly; activities include beachcombing on private beaches, kayaking and hiking in the adjacent Moran State Park. The Doe Bay Café offers delicious organic meals and bakery treats. Yoga and massage are offered regularly. Depending upon the time of year and the amount of space needed, a family of four will pay from \$45 for camping to \$145 per night for a cabin, 360-376-2291.