

The Wonder of the Woods What Are Our Children Missing?

By Mary Jacobs

Fewer young people are experiencing the joy of playing outdoors and exploring nature, says a noted author, who shows how such neglect can be harmful and how programs like Scouting can help to reverse the trend.

Can anyone remember those lazy childhood summer days spent roaming the woods and fields? When Mom said, “Go outside and play,” and everybody stayed outdoors until supper time?

For most youngsters today, those opportunities for exploring the outdoors are fewer or virtually nonexistent. And that, author Richard Louv believes, is depriving children of much more than fun and fresh air.

In his new book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books), Louv takes an in-depth look at the importance of children developing a connection with nature. He finds an alarming increase in what he calls “nature-deficit disorder,” a trend that’s keeping kids indoors much of the time, contributing to obesity, depression, hyperactivity, and attention problems.

“There’s something in us as human beings that needs to see natural horizons,” Louv argues. “When we don’t get that, we don’t do so well.”

Children today, he says, rarely get to experience the simple pleasures of nature, such as fishing in a stream, building a tree house, hiking in the woods, climbing a tree, watching a campfire, idling in a special hiding spot in the woods, or just gazing at a nighttime sky or a bug in a vacant lot.

Even the passive enjoyment of watching natural landscapes from the window of a car has been pre-empted by built-in video screens.

What children today are missing, Louv says, is more than just another form of fun. Nature engages all of the senses in a way that few other experiences can. “We need natural experiences,” he writes. “We require fully activated senses in order to feel fully alive.”

Louv supports his argument with recent studies suggesting that direct exposure to the outdoors can reduce the incidence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), decrease stress, and boost children’s creativity and concentration. Research has shown

that “Kids who play outdoors were calmer, more open to conflict resolution, and did remarkably better in science and math,” he says.

Louv thinks parents need to be aware of the importance of this natural bonding with nature and make a greater effort to get their children outside. And he believes Scouting—from Tiger Cubs through Cub Scouting, Boy Scouting, and Venturing—offers a special opportunity to help address this “deficit.”

STUCK INSIDE

Today’s younger generation is the first in history that isn’t spending big chunks of time outdoors, Louv observes, and we are only beginning to understand the negative ways this affects children.

“For tens of thousands of years, human beings’ first developmental stages were spent in nature, playing outdoors,” he says. “That has reversed in just a matter of decades...and it has enormous implications.”

Most parents are all too aware of why children aren’t enjoying the outdoors in ways previous generations did: Too many tightly scheduled, highly structured activities; lots more homework; too much pressure to succeed in academic pursuits and organized sports; and increased parental fears of “stranger danger.”

And there’s the siren lure of the PlayStation 2’s and Xbox 360’s and other electronic gizmos.

A Kaiser Family Foundation study, for example, found youngsters 8 to 18 average 44 hours a week plugged into some sort of electronic medium, whether it’s an iPod, computer, or video game.

“I interviewed a boy who said he preferred playing indoors because that’s where the electrical outlets were,” says Louv. “But that ‘plugged in’ environment promotes an atrophied perception. The world is reduced to a flat-panel screen.”

There are other reasons kids aren’t getting out: Neighborhoods that once ended at a woods or a field are now surrounded by expanding urban development.

And our litigious society makes any mildly risky outdoor activity off limits.

For example, concerns about potential lawsuits prompted a school in Broward County, Fla., to banish swings from playgrounds. And to keep children safe, a community in California now prohibits tree houses.

Louv believes parents can counter these trends if they better understand the downside of limiting outdoor play. He cites research, such as a University of Illinois study, which suggested that children as young as 5 with ADHD show a reduction in symptoms when exposed to any kind of nature.

Another study showed that people who could see a natural vista—forest, landscape, or mountain—from their hospital bed recovered faster than patients whose view was limited to urban vistas.

Why does nature have such a profound effect on the human psyche? Louv thinks that exposure to a nature setting demands “immersion attention”—the use of all of one’s senses. That kind of exposure in turn boosts the brain’s ability to sustain “directed attention”—the concentration and focus that allows a child to stay attentive long enough to, for example, finish a homework assignment.

Louv would like to see more studies on the subject, but he says that’s unlikely, because there’s little commercial incentive. It’s ironic, he notes, that one of the few studies on the subject was conducted by a laundry detergent manufacturer—to find out why kids weren’t getting grass stains on their jeans anymore.

He also worries that children with no deep connections to nature are unlikely to become adults who want to serve as good stewards of the natural world.

“The health of the earth is at stake as well,” he says. “How the young respond to nature... will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes—our daily lives.”

AN OUTDOOR BIBLE

David Bates, BSA national director of camping and conservation, believes Richard Louv is onto something big.

At a recent conference, Bates held up a copy of *Last Child in the Woods* as he welcomed professional Scouters who run outdoor programs across the nation. “This is your homework,” he announced. “This is what the Boy Scouts of America is about.”

Later, Bates elaborated on why he is so impressed with Louv’s findings. “Basically, the book reinforces the idea that the out-of-doors is a positive way to influence young people, something Scouting’s founder, Robert Baden-Powell, understood 100 years ago,” he said. “The book helped me focus on where our priorities really ought to be.”

It came as no surprise that the conference’s theme was “More Outdoors.”

Bates added that no other organization is better equipped to offer outdoor experiences than the BSA, which operates almost 500 local council camps and high adventure programs nationwide. And he adds that Louv’s “nature-deficit disorder” concept may provide a key to making progress in the seemingly endless struggle to keep boys involved and committed in Scouting.

“We recently surveyed boys who had dropped out of Scouting,” said Bates. “Almost 50 percent had had only five—or fewer—outdoor experiences. But among those who had had at least 12 outdoor experiences, only 15 percent dropped out.

“That’s why we encourage every troop to offer some kind of outing at least once a month. It can be a day hike, a camping trip, or a conservation project—as long as it’s something that gets them outdoors.” (See “Heading Out,” sidebar.)

Louv believes Scout leaders can play a key role in educating parents about “nature-deficit disorder” and the importance of giving children unstructured time to explore nature.

“Scouting offers a safe way for kids to have an experience of nature,” he notes. “When parents realize that, more boys will become involved. It will be a good thing for Scouting and for the country.”

To increase parental awareness, Louv says, Scout leaders need to focus on the multiple benefits of outdoor experiences. Otherwise, a parent might choose other outside activities rather than a camping experience—in the mistaken belief that spending time in a natural setting is “nice but not necessary.”

But if parents understand the real physical, mental, and emotional benefits of natural experiences, they will be more inclined to strongly encourage their children to go camping.

“Parents need to understand, there’s a risk in keeping kids away from nature,” Louv says. “If parents understand the impact of nature on a child’s attention span and on his creativity, they’ll give outdoor experiences a priority.”

But what about “the outdoors is too risky” kind of thinking? Scout leaders can respond to these parental fears by putting them in perspective and boosting awareness of the benefits of outdoor activities, David Bates said.

Isolating kids from the risks of strangers and the outdoors isn’t the answer, he argued. Better to give them the knowledge and experience to handle risks. For example, crossing the street can be hazardous, but parents would not decree that a child never cross a street. “We try to teach kids how to take care of themselves in the outdoors,” Bates noted.

Letting young Scouts take responsibility for the challenges of a wilderness experience—preparing for bad weather or planning food and equipment—builds character and promotes leadership.

“In outdoors adventures, there are all kinds of scenarios that require young people to make decisions about how they should adapt,” Bates said.

“When many parents think of a program that promotes outdoors experiences, they think Scouting,” Richard Louv observes.

And quality Scouting programs provide plenty of opportunities—now more important than ever—for children to experience the outdoors.

Freelance writer Mary Jacobs lives in Dallas, Tex. Her most recent article in Scouting, about Michael Gurian’s book The Minds of Boys, appeared in the November-December 2005 issue. Read it at www.scoutingmagazine.org/issues/0511/a-minds.html.

Heading Out

In light of Richard Louv's research, how can Scout leaders make outdoor experiences as meaningful and beneficial as possible? Here are a few tips:

- **Bring an expert:** Invite a naturalist along on one or more outings to point out interesting wildlife or plants. "Scouts are more likely to have an appreciation for things they know something about," said David Bates, BSA director of camping and conservation.
- **Diversify:** A variety of experiences and different locations will keep Scouts engaged, said Bill Steele, associate director of the BSA's Cub Scouting Division.
- **Minimize "canned nature":** Zoos and theme parks have their place, but keep in mind that they offer tightly controlled experiences—without the element of discovery in real nature. Contrast that to an activity where Cub Scouts scrutinize a single square yard of earth in a wooded area, desert, or just a backyard. "Scouts discover that there's an abundance of life there, right at your feet," Steele said.
- **Schedule unscheduled time:** As Scouts gain maturity and experience, give them age-appropriate doses of freedom and unstructured time to explore. "With approval from the Scoutmaster, and the right advance planning, patrols of boys in their young teens and up should be able to make brief outings on their own," said David Bates.