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Have Our Children Forgotten How to Play Outdoors?



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Author Richard Louv believes that America's children are now suffering from a syndrome he identifies as "nature-deficit disorder." In his recent book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Louv suggests that the current generation of American children knows the Discovery Channel better than their own backyards—and that this loss of contact with nature leads to impoverished lives and stunted imagination.



Louv begins by recounting an anecdote involving his son, Matthew. When the boy was about ten years of age, he asked his father: "Dad, how come it was more fun when you were a kid?" The boy was honestly reflecting on his knowledge of his father's boyhood. Richard Louv, like most of us who came of age in his generation, spent most of our playing time outdoors, building forts in the woods, exploring every nook and cranny of our yards, and participating in activities that centered in child-organized outdoor fun. Louv reflects, "Americans around my age, baby boomers or older, enjoyed a kind of free, natural play that seems, in the era of kid pagers, instant messaging, and Nintendo, like a quaint artifact."

Louv argues that this represents nothing less than a sudden shift in the way Americans live, raise their children, and engage the natural world. "Within the space of a few decades,

the way children understand and experience nature has changed radically. The polarity of the relationship has reversed. Today, kids are aware of the global threats to the environment—but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading. That’s exactly the opposite of how it was when I was a child.”

In this book, Richard Louv is articulating what many of us have been thinking. I recognize that my own boyhood is far removed from that of my son. It seems as if the world has been drastically changed. I grew up in neighborhoods that were typically suburban. Nevertheless, the woods were always nearby. For me, the “woods” included untamed tracts of land that were awaiting future suburban development. Nevertheless, this land was filled with trees, swamps, creeks, snakes, crawdads, and all the creeping and crawling things that used to call boys out into the woods.

Louv understands that this transformation of the way we encounter nature extends even to activities that are supposedly focused on nature itself. “Not that long ago, summer camp was a place where you camped, hiked in the woods, learned about plants and animals, or told firelight stories about ghosts or mountain lions,” Louv recalls. “As likely as not today, ‘summer camp’ is a weight-loss camp, or a computer camp. For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear—to ignore.”

In reality, many children have almost no contact with nature. They play indoors, focusing on electronic screens that produce an artificial experience. They are surrounded by creature comforts and watched over by anxious parents who are afraid that violent criminals are lurking behind every green tree. “Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature,” Louv observes. “That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities.”

The larger cultural context is part of the problem. Louv notes that the academic world now seems far more interested in theoretical disciplines than in subjects like natural history and zoology. Beyond this, the biotechnology revolution threatens to blur the lines between humans and other animals—and the line between humans and machines.

Is contact with nature necessary for healthy childhood? Louv is absolutely confident that children have a deep need for contact with the natural world and its wonders. “Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it,” Louv insists. In his view, “whatever shape nature takes, it offers each child an older, larger world separate from parents.” The natural world offers children an opportunity to think, dream, touch, and play out fantasies about how he or she imagines the world. Nature brings a capacity for wonder and a connection with something real that is endlessly fascinating and largely outside human control.

Louv tells of interviewing thousands of children in the course of previous research. At one point, he received this candid comment from a fourth-grade boy in San Diego: "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."

In the experience of all too many children, the electrical outlets are the determining reality. We have allowed our children to be so seduced by entertainment and information technologies that many believe that without electricity, experience is virtually impossible.

As one mom noted, children now spend much of their time *watching*. "We've become a more sedentary society," she observes. "When I was a kid growing up in Detroit, we were always outdoors. The kids who stayed indoors were the odd ones. We didn't have any huge wide-open spaces, but we were always outdoors on the streets—in the vacant lots, jumping rope, or playing baseball or hopscotch. We were out there playing even after we got older."

Many of today's children show little inclination to go outdoors at all. Louv describes the environment as experienced by many American children as the "third frontier"—an environment that is characterized by increasing distance from nature, an intellectualized understanding of the animal world, and a disconnection in the human consciousness between food and its origins.

That last point is of particular interest. Louv observes that many children have little knowledge of how food is produced. Lacking any experience with farming, livestock, and the food chain, these children simply assume that food is produced by something like a factory process. Young people may join animal rights groups without knowing anything about the actual animals involved. Louv argues that many college students become vegetarians without understanding that vegetables and vegetable byproducts are not manufactured indoors.

Richard Louv is a keen observer—watching our culture and taking careful note of how nature has become an abstraction for many of us. Why are so many Americans putting television and video screens in their vehicles? Louv observes: "The highway's edges may not be postcard perfect. But for a century, children's early understanding of how cities and nature fit together was gained from the backseat: the empty farmhouse at the edge of the subdivision; the variety of architecture, here and there; the woods and fields and water beyond the seamy edges—all that was and still is available to the eye. This was the landscape that we watched as children. It was our drive-by movie."

These days, many parents allow kids to start the DVD player as soon as the car hits the interstate.

Interestingly, Louv also points to the epidemic of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder [ADHD], suggesting that a lack of contact with nature may be, at least in part, a cause for the attention deficit and disconnectedness experienced by many young children—especially young boys. He suggests that a “nature-deficit disorder” may be behind the phenomenon now routinely diagnosed as ADHD. Louv goes so far as to suggest that a dose of real contact with the natural world may be more powerful than Ritalin in helping children to overcome patterns of hyperactivity and distraction. The same prescription would likely help parents as well.

Richard Louv is a champion of nature, and *Last Child in the Woods* is a powerful call for human beings to reconnect with the natural world. It would do us all a world of good to take a walk in the woods, to play outdoors, and to remember that the world is filled with a variety of flora and fauna that defies the imagination and thrills the senses.

Last Child in the Woods is a fascinating book, though at times, Louv leans toward a form of nature mysticism. Nevertheless, Christians will read this book to great profit, remembering that the biblical worldview presents an affirmation of the goodness of creation. After all, Christians know that every atom and molecule of creation testifies of the glory of God.

This is our Father’s world, and we would do well to receive this world and enjoy it, while giving praise and glory to God for the beauty and bounty it contains. We understand that nature is not an end to itself, and we affirm that the creation exists as the theater of God’s glory for the drama of redemption. All this should help Christians to remember that we honor God most faithfully when we receive His good gifts most gratefully.

Christians should take the lead in reconnecting with nature and disconnecting from machines. Taking the kids for a long walk in the woods would be a great start.

This article was first published August 25, 2005. During the month of July, I will be posting new articles and also featuring some articles from the archives I hope you will find helpful. This month requires a different schedule as I spend time with family and do groundwork on upcoming articles, messages, books, and projects. My normal schedule for new articles will resume as August begins.

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