



Is your child at risk for nature deficit disorder?

Never before in history have children been so disconnected from the natural world. Over the last decade much research has been done to describe and document the de-naturing of childhood. A widening circle of researchers believes that the disconnection from nature has enormous implications for human health and child development. Some startling facts: The average eight year old child is better able to identify cartoon characters than native plant and animal species such as beetles and spruce trees, in their own community. The rate at which doctors prescribe anti-depressants to children has doubled in the last five years with two-thirds of those being for preschool children. Recent studies show that too much computer use is detrimental to the developing mind. Nature-deficit disorder is not a medical condition, it is a term used by author and scholar Richard Louv to describe the human costs of alienation from nature in his book "Last Child in the Woods". This alienation damages children and shapes adults, families and communities and is linked to some of the most disturbing childhood trends such as rises in obesity, Attention Deficit Disorder and depression. Some of the costs to children include diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.

Children learn through their senses, through directly experiencing their world using their smell, sight, hearing, taste and touch. It is through these direct experiences with the world around them that they are able to transfer learning to the inner world of thoughts and feelings. For a whole generation of kids, direct experiences in the backyard, in the park, in the fields and woods, has been replaced by indirect learning, through machines. As children tend to experience more of their world through secondary, two-dimensional sources such as television and the Internet, they are losing a critical factor in their development. It is difficult, if not impossible to creatively engage and interact with a television screen. Studies on adults show that increased time on the Internet have been linked to higher levels of depression and loneliness. As we get more "connected" electronically, are we becoming more disconnected with each other?

This has huge implications on communication. Ninety percent of our communication is non-verbal and includes our tone of voice, our facial expressions, and our gestures. In the era of email and texting where face-to-face contact does not exist, we are left with just 10% of our message getting through. What are the implications of this for our children?

New technological communication also does not involve human touch. In fact, human touch is being discouraged, even forbidden; yet it is this direct contact with other human beings that lies

at the heart of infant development. It is also key to such vital skills as relationship building and peace making. Lack of human touch has been linked to higher levels of aggression.

Despite widespread and convincing evidence that proves the benefits of nature, sending kids outside to play is increasingly difficult. Computers, television and video games compete for their time, of course, but it is also our fears of traffic, strangers, even virus-carrying mosquitoes, that keep children indoors. Indoor play spaces have been marketed as more desirable and outdoor play spaces have been diminishing. Structured outdoor play in the form of soccer games and baseball games seem to be more acceptable these days than plain old unstructured exploring an area of grass or a grove of trees. Outdoor play areas are becoming more and more “designed” and “structured”. Children, like adults, are at risk of becoming overscheduled and over-organized. Free, unstructured play and exploration of our natural environments are lacking.

Children are not the only losers in this disconnection with nature. Nature itself loses. How can we expect children to grow up caring for the Earth if they feel no connection to, no attachment to, and no responsibility for it?

For more information on the benefits of nature to preschool children watch for our article next month entitled: “A walk in the park – Nature’s Ritalin”. As one author states, “there is a great need to educate parents about research that focuses on the many benefits to a child’s emotional, social, cognitive and physical development when exposed to nature play and nature experiences”. Such knowledge may inspire us to choose a different path, one that leads to a nature-child reunion.