



## Last Child in the Woods

### *Go outside and play!*

Many of us heard these simple words every day as we grew up, busy with bikes or sunset kickball games or - if we were really lucky - filling a jar with tadpoles from a nearby creek. Where has the outdoorsy childhood gone?

To the couch, according to Richard Louv's engrossing book "Last Child in the Woods." With obesity in kids soaring to epidemic proportions and millions of American children on medication for attention deficit disorder, worried parents should be eager to hear Louv's sage advice for curing what he terms "Nature-Deficit Disorder."

"Nature deficit disorder" is not a medical condition but a description of the symptoms that are displayed when children are cut off from nature. How did this happen? Louv points to the proliferation of technology, cable TV, video games, home computers, and the Internet have all cut into the time children could spend outdoors. Kids in the wired generation may be able to spout data about the Amazon rain forest but they've logged no time in the nearby woods.

Algonquin Books 04/05  
ISBN 1565123913

In one interview a fourth grader in San Diego said: "I like to play indoors 'cause that's where all the outlets are."

Anyone who has experienced the delights of direct contact with nature knows that this experience can reduce stress, foster self-confidence, and increase creativity. But, notes Louv, the media, schools, families, and neighborhood regulatory structures have "scared children straight out of the woods and fields" and given in to a litigious culture that favors organized sports over unsupervised play in nature.

With our new city-centric modes of living, children are increasingly marooned in front of the TV set or computer screen. But it's not only computers, television, and video games that are keeping kids inside. It's also their parents' fears of traffic, strangers, Lyme disease, and West Nile virus; their schools' emphasis on more and more homework; their structured schedules; and their lack of access to natural areas.

Louv offers creative ways of getting children outdoors. Most interesting, Louv explores the calming effects of outdoors activities on children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, an area scientists have only recently begun to research. He says that "nature therapy," as opposed to the many pharmaceutical fixes for hyperactivity, is "widely accessible, free of side effects, non-stigmatizing, and inexpensive." And, environment-based education dramatically improves standardized test scores and grade-point averages and develops skills in problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that childhood experiences in nature stimulate creativity. Lastly, he examines the spiritual necessity of nature for the young. Hopefully all readers of this important wake-up call will get involved and foster nature-child reunions as soon as possible.

The information compiled above is from various Internet sources including the Publisher's (Algonquin Books) press release and a report by Andrea Hoag from the St. Louis Post – Dispatch.

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