

Parents Urged to Let Children Play Outside

By Faiza Elmasry
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American children spend too much time indoors watching television

American children are spending more and more of their leisure time indoors -- watching TV, playing video games and chatting with friends on line. That concerns many child development experts and others who would rather encourage them to be outside hiking, climbing trees, riding bikes and watching birds. They want to end children's *alienation* from nature, and what they believe are the adverse effects on child development.

"I grew up in a pretty large family, having six older brothers and sisters. All I did was play outside," says Olympic gold medal soccer player Abby Wambach. "My parents helped out in that arena. They locked the door on us; they told us you couldn't come back until dinnertime. So, I pretty much spent my life outdoors."

Even if playing outside doesn't lead to a gold medal, Darell Hammond says it is important for a child's physical and mental development.

"Playing outside helps release endorphins in your body that motivate you," he says. "It gives you sensory experiences around touch, smell and sight."

Hammond is Co-Founder of KaBoom!, a non-profit that is working to build a playground within walking distance of every child in America.

"When walking through the woods, it actually helps your balance because it's not like walking on a sidewalk that may be 100 percent flat." Walking across "different types of land increases your heart rate," he says.

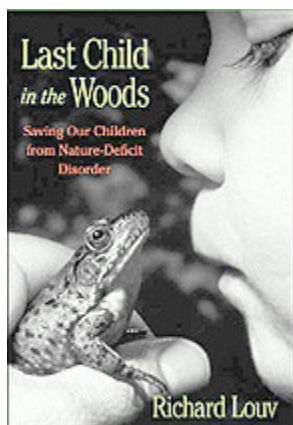
When children play in nature, whether it's in a wooded park or a playground, Hammond says they tend to invent their own games and are more likely to play collectively. "When kids get outside, their activity runs wild."

Unfortunately, he says, children don't play outside today as often as they did three decades ago, because "parents are busier; kids are more overscheduled."

Children are spending more time after school in highly structured activities, playing organized sports or attending music and art classes. During school vacations, they are usually busy at summer camp.



Children in New Orleans enjoy a playground built by KaBoom!



Author Richard Louv says playing outside is the answer to childhood obesity

Writer and outdoor advocate Richard Louv says when children have free time at home, they are more likely to stay inside, because there might not be a nearby park or even a sidewalk.

"Even when you have a sidewalk, for example, there is more and more traffic. That's a legitimate fear," he says. In recent decades, Louv notes, the fear that a stranger will abduct or harm a child has accelerated greatly in the United States and other countries.

In his book, *Last Child In The Woods*, Louv says children's alienation from nature causes what he calls "nature deficit disorder," although he is careful to point out that "nature deficit disorder is not a medical diagnosis.

"Perhaps it should, but it is not. It's a societal problem," he says. "It's the society that gets in the way of kids going outside and playing in nature."

Louv says playing outside is the answer to America's child obesity problem as well as many other childhood disorders.

"For example, studies of Attention Deficit Disorder being done in the University of Illinois show that kids with those symptoms, the symptoms get much better with just a little bit of contact with nature in kids as young as 5 years old," he says.

Experiencing nature through outdoor play is also the best school for tomorrow's environmentalists, according to musician Chuck Leavell, author of the children's book, *Tree Farmer*. "If you ask little Johnny where the guitar comes from, he's likely to tell you from the music store," he says. "In fact the guitar comes from a resource of wood. So we want to get these young minds thinking about nature, about how bio-diversity works together. You want to plant this seed and you want to let this see grow and flourish."



Musician Chuck Leavell wants children to appreciate nature

To get children outdoors, and back to nature, Richard Louv advocates a comprehensive approach. "Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other adults, we need to take kids outdoors ourselves," he says. In addition, Louv says we need to support "morally and financially" institutions and organizations that encourage kids to spend time outside like scouting, nature centers, and schools with outdoor classrooms.

"There is a movement occurring, across the United States at least," Louv says. "Urban regions, at least 27 of them, have produced regional campaigns and movements. Some of them are called Leave No Child Inside."

Louv says urban developers should also be part of this comprehensive approach. They should be encouraged to design and create residential areas that include places where children can play outdoors freely and safely.

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