



**Children and Nature: a Natural Attachment**  
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Yesterday after a long series of meetings, I hopped on my new lime green bicycle to ride around the city lakes before dinner. Ringing my pink bell – a gift from my daughter, who knew it would win points with my granddaughter – I zipped by a few rollerbladers, relishing the breeze on my face. After a brisk ride, I pulled off the trail and lay down in the grass to watch the clouds drift by. Ah, summer!

Those priceless moments take me back to my 1950s childhood and the countless hours I spent riding my bike, exploring the woods on the edge of town, sometimes imagining myself in some Nancy Drew-type mystery, always coming home ready to fall into bed so I could start the adventure all over again in the morning. Similarly, I remember my own children's outdoor exploration in the 70s – Erin stopping to "smell the roses" (every one of them!) in the Rose Garden by Lake Harriet, Ryan coming home covered with mud, eager to tell me about the frogs and bugs he found along Minnehaha Creek.

But how many children today are creating those outdoor memories? Not many, according to a recent review of studies of how children spend their time. Kids today spend much more time indoors compared to their parents' generation, a good deal of it using technology. Even when they are outdoors, kids today are likely to be involved in activities directed by adults. For many children, gone are the days of unstructured outdoor exploration. Schools even have eliminated recess, removing one of the few opportunities for kids to run and play during the school day. And it is rare to find a school that capitalizes on the rich *natural* learning opportunities available outdoors.

The growing disconnection of children from nature distressed my friend, Richard Louv, a San Diego journalist with a passion for nature and deep concern for the environment. So a few years ago he set out

to explore the causes and consequences of this disconnection and seek solutions to what he saw as a major threat to the well-being of children and our society. The result was the best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (2005). Interviewing hundreds of people (adults and children), Louv uncovered at least three major reasons why children were staying inside: 1) parental fear (particularly of “stranger danger,” even though statistics suggest the risk of stranger abduction is lower today than it was in the 1970s); 2) technology and its nearly addictive power over kids; and 3) in some communities, lack of access to safe places to be outdoors.

But wherever he went, Louv encountered a powerful desire for change, a longing to reintroduce children to the outdoor experiences most adults remembered so fondly. Thus, with the book as a launchpad, and fueled by the hundreds of speeches Louv has given since the book’s publication, a movement to reconnect children with nature began to gather momentum across the country – a movement sometimes dubbed “Leave No Child Inside.”

To help bring interested individuals and organizations together to share ideas and resources – and to gather research to support and inform the rapidly-growing movement – Louv and a handful of colleagues formed a new non-profit organization, the Children and Nature Network (C&NN). (I’m delighted to be one of the founding board members.)

To take the movement to a new level, in August C&NN convened 70 regional leaders from across the US and Canada for a 2-day meeting at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Together, this diverse and energetic group is succeeding in putting the children and nature issue on the radar screen of parents, educators, urban planners, public officials, and other concerned citizens across the political spectrum. And they are generating creative strategies to make sure all children have safe ways to enjoy – and learn from – outdoor activities.

So, why is this issue so important? Although, in my opinion, this aspect of children’s daily lives has not received the attention from researchers it deserves, a growing body of research yields evidence

of the costs to children and society when kids are not engaged in active play and exploration outdoors. These include:

- Childhood obesity and the health problems associated with it
- Difficulty concentrating and learning in the classroom (perhaps especially for children with “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder”)
- Missed opportunities for learning that builds on natural curiosity and encourages creativity (what many experienced educators see as the best way to learn)
- A new generation of adults who care little about the environment because they have not learned to know and love nature firsthand (e.g., one study showed that children who experience nature in the wild before the age of 11 are more likely as adults to be good stewards of the environment.)

I also would add to the list of consequences lost opportunities to strengthen and sustain a strong, secure parent-child attachment. In my years at the University of Minnesota, my major area of research has been the development of parent-infant attachment, shown to be an important foundation for later competence and well-being. But my own family experience has taught me there's no better way to sustain that warm relationship with your growing child than to get away from phones, TVs, computers, and distracting household tasks to discover the wonders of nature together. Being together in nature also makes it easy to follow the lead of your child's natural curiosity and interests – to be sensitive and responsive to your child's cues, which research shows to be a primary ingredient of a secure attachment.

From simple trips to the lake or creek when my kids were small, to hiking the Grand Canyon or trekking through the rainforest with my adult children, exploring together outdoors has enabled us to stay close, healthy and learning together. Now that my adult children have kids of their own, we all are committed to making sure that the next generation reaps the full benefits of living life to the fullest in the great outdoors.

To learn more about why this issue is so important and what you can do to make sure no child is left inside, check out the Children and Nature Network, [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org). Then turn off your computer and get outdoors!

*Marti Erickson, Ph.D., is a consultant and former director (retired) in the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development and a founding board member of the Children & Nature Network. With her daughter Erin, Marti also hosts the weekly talk show Mom Enough™ (formerly Good Enough Moms) and appears regularly on KARE-TV (NBC) as a child and family expert. The grandmother of four young children, Marti is delighted to be introducing another generation to the joy and wonder of nature.*