



Summer 2011

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Back to Nature

by Cynthia Hasseldahl

Do you remember climbing trees and building forts? Do you remember playing outside until it got dark? Do you remember playing with neighborhood friends, unsupervised? Many of today's children will grow up without having these memories.

Today there are many children who spend most of their time indoors or in structured activities that are directly supervised by adults. They are not given, or do not choose to take, the freedom to go outside and explore nature. This disconnect may be having a harmful effect on them.



Journalist and author, Richard Louv, coins the term "nature deficit disorder" in his book [Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder](#). This disorder is not a medical diagnosis but is seen in terms of the cost of children being alienated from nature. The effects are diminished use of the senses, attention challenges, and even physical and emotional illness. Society has changed drastically over the last thirty to forty years, and there are now many reasons why children spend less time in God's world of nature. Three primary aspects of modern times have added to this disconnect. The first is technology, including the development of air conditioning, television, cars, computers, video games, and cell phones. The second aspect is time. Time is taken up through structured activities (play dates, athletics, and lessons), work schedules, family schedules, and homework, leaving less time for children to play and explore outside. The third is fear, presenting itself in the forms of Mysophobia (fear of germs), stranger danger, injuries, and possible litigation.

Because of the lack of connection to nature, children may be suffering from increased levels of disorders such as ADHD, obesity, anxiety, and depression. According to the American Psychiatric Association, rates of mental disorders have risen dramatically. Additionally, the report from the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports indicates that the physical health and abilities of our nation's children are on the decline. Louv indicates that the increase in childhood obesity leads many healthcare workers to worry that the current generation of children may be the first since World War II to die at an earlier age than their parents. We need to do something, now. The goal is to equip and encourage parents, teachers, and administrators in the Lutheran learning community to help children reconnect with nature.



Research shows that there are many benefits for children if they spend time outdoors connecting with nature. It is no surprise that there are physical benefits but other benefits are realized as well. Studies of schools that use outdoor classrooms and other forms of experiential education produce gains in several subjects including science and math. If there is any chance to help children just by letting them be out in nature so they can explore using their senses, we should encourage them to do so.

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Review, Reflect, Resolve

How can you encourage teachers to use the outdoors if they have no affinity for outdoor activities?

How can you integrate nature into your ministry?

This article is a summary of Action Research, a "new" format for professional development. What are some topics that your individual faculty members might take on as Action Research that might be shared with others?

Links & Resources

Author's resources:

Main paper: Reconnecting Children with Nature: Action Research: Providing Evidence and Activities for "Nature Based" Experiences in the Lutheran Learning Community *NOTE: The file is 4.7 MB, so will take some time to download.* Here is the [cover](#), [abstract](#) and [contents](#) only. *File is 85KB.*

100 Things to do Through the Seasons

Full-color brochure

Other Resources:

Louv, Richard. 2006. [Leave No Child Behind: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder](#). Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books.

[Nature Explore](#)

[More Kids in the Woods](#)

Learn more about Action Research at [Rory](#)

The literature points out that children should be allowed to get out and explore nature. Lightly supervised if possible! So what can be done to help children reconnect with nature?

There are several programs and resources to help parents and teachers with ideas for what they can do.

The first is [Nature Explore](#), a collaborative project of the *Arbor Day Foundation* and the *Dimensions Foundation*. This program connects children with nature. Th program includes a [workshop series](#) for educators.

Another is [More Kids in the Woods](#) by the *U.S. Forest Service*, a competitive funding program for partnership projects that engages kids in active, meaningful learning experiences that get kids outside. Projects focus on reaching diverse youth and serving under-served populations, using outdoor activities and nature-based learning to create meaningful and lasting connections to nature and to advance children's health.

A third program is [Leave No Child Inside](#), a loose collection of some 40 regional campaigns, inspired by Louv's book, to reconnect kids with nature. If you Google "Leave No Child Inside" and your state or region, you will likely turn up a program in your area.

Louv tells us that "getting more kids outdoors, riding bikes, running, swimming — and, especially, experiencing nature directly — could serve as an antidote to much of what ails the young." We as teachers and administrators in the Lutheran learning community can take the lead on this; encouraging a generation that values, preserves, and cares for the world God created.

The work of reconnecting kids with nature can begin with an activity as simple as going for a walk in the park, and can grow to be as complex as helping with the development and construction of an environment-based outdoor classroom. The most important thing is to encourage children to get outside and use their senses to explore the wonderful world God has created for us.

Cynthia Hasseldahl is a graduate student at Concordia University Nebraska in the Early Childhood Education Program.

Photos by Kathryn Brewer, art director for **ShapingtheFuture**.

[O'Brien of the University of Toronto](#) or download a [pdf](#) from Brown University.




Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of **ShapingtheFuture**:

[K-9 Comfort Dogs](#) by *Jill Zempel* ([Feature](#))

[Response to Intervention \(RtI\) Facts](#) by *Kara Frincke* ([Feature](#))

[Twitter: A Great Tool for Educators](#) by *Kevin Creutz* ([ETnet](#))

 ShapingtheFuture is published quarterly by Lutheran Education Association and distributed to members of LEA. All material included in ShapingtheFuture is the property of Lutheran Education Association and may not be reproduced without permission.

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