

September 15, 017

# Counselor's Corner



In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv (2005) relates this story:

The back page of the October issue of *San Francisco* magazine displays a vivid photograph of a small boy, eyes wide with excitement and joy, leaping and running on a great expanse of California beach, storm clouds and towering waves behind him. A short article explains that the boy was hyperactive, he had been kicked out of his school, and his parents had not known what to do with him - but they observed how nature engaged and soothed him. So for years they took their son to beaches, forests, dunes and rivers to let nature do its work. The photograph was taken in 1907. The boy is Ansel Adams. (pg. 102)

## Nature Deficit Disorder

This summer, my family and I took many camping trips, exploring Oregon's deserts, forests, rivers and coastlines. I love taking my 5 year old out in the natural world, far from our electronically driven lifestyle and the attention fatigue that can plague many of us.

As parents and educators, we should be concerned with statistics regarding how much time our youth spend indoors and with the latest technological and media outlets instead of in natural restorative environments.

Richard Louv coined the phrase *nature deficit disorder* in 2005. He believes that human beings, especially children, are spending less time outdoors resulting in a wide range of behavioral problems, lessened use of their senses, elevated rates of physical and emotional illness and attention difficulties. While *nature deficit disorder* is not a formal diagnosis, it is a way to express the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of our estrangement from nature, predominately for our children in their developing years. Nature captures our attention in subtle ways and allows our direct attention abilities a chance to regenerate. Spending more time in natural settings or even exposure to pictures of a restorative environment can have a positive effect on children's creativity, executive functioning, attention span, stress reduction, cognitive development and connection to the earth.



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## What Can We Do?

I found the following suggestions in Children and Nature Network's *Executive Function Toolkit*. The following nature activities can help adolescents practice and enhance their maturing executive function skills.

- **Physical and mental challenges** – Planning a camping trip can engage a teen in creative thinking and anticipatory problem solving about what situations might occur and what supplies are needed to cope. Planning as a group can lead to social organizing and strategic thinking, as can setting up camp and conducting basic survival tasks such as fire building, cooking, and weather-proofing.
- **Creative activities** – Nature journaling, writing poetry, sketching, and photography can encourage students to self-reflect, understand feelings and frustrations, communicate effectively, and make and examine decisions. Presenting creative work can improve social and non-social organizational skills.
- **Service activities** – Teens benefit in many ways from successfully completing useful work while building self-confidence, self-worth, competence, wider social networks, and practical problem-solving skills. Outdoor service projects that teens can organize may include guided nature activities for younger children, tree plantings, stream cleanups, trail maintenance, or rain garden construction. Social and communication skills are enhanced if the service project is planned through teamwork.
- **Goal setting, planning and monitoring** – Teenagers are often very connected to electronic devices. Consider finding ways to make those devices part of your explorations in nature in a way that helps them with goal-directed behavior. For example, they might create a portfolio of nature photography, produce an outdoor film, or start a blog documenting their nature activities. Teens can become the authors and co-directors of your outdoor experiences.
- **Risk taking** – Engaging safely in activities that involve risk, such as long distance hiking, rock climbing, or managing a fire, develops self-control, focus, problem-solving, spatial awareness, healthy limit testing, memory, mental flexibility, and perseverance. While risk-taking is especially appealing for teens, it is fundamental to every stage in a child's development—in age-appropriate ways.

## Resources

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