

Nurture with Nature

If you have little ones, then you know getting them dressed, their shoes on the right feet, their diaper bags stocked and crammed in the trunk next to the assorted strollers and toys, and your precious cargo strapped snugly in their car seats for an excursion outside the house can be a tad trying. But if you happen to be heading to the park, it's well worth the effort. Green is good for your kids.

Statistics from *Playing For Keeps*, an early childhood initiative by the Association of Children's Museums, show that today the average 2-year-old spends more than four hours a day in front of a TV or computer screen. And more than 80 percent of children under age 2 and more than 60 percent of those ages 2 to 5 do not have access to outdoor play on a daily basis.

All that time inside in front of the TV translates into shorter attention spans and an increased risk of obesity for our children.

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, calls the repercussions of removing nature from our children's lives "cultural autism," where our kids use of their collective senses "is reduced to the size of a screen."

Louv cautions, "Only in nature are we using our full senses all at the same time in a positive way," and adds that "time in nature is not leisure time; it's an essential investment in our children's health."

In fact, nature is a vital ingredient in coping with life's rough patches, says Nancy Wells, an assistant professor of design and environmental analysis who participated in conducting a study at Cornell University. "Our study finds that life's stressful events appear not to cause as much psychological distress in children who live in high-nature conditions compared with children who live in low-nature conditions," she says.

And nature scenes on your TV set don't count. As far as reducing stress goes, that appears to have no more effect than sitting your child in front of a blank wall.

Peter Kahn, a University of Washington associate professor of psychology confirms: "Let's not be fooled into thinking we can live without nature. We are losing direct experiences with nature. Instead, more and more we're experiencing nature represented technologically through television and other media. Children grow up watching Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. That's probably better than nothing. But as a species we need interaction with actual nature for our physical and psychological well-being.

Louv agrees. "Never before in our history have children been so separated from nature. They can tell you anything about the Amazon rain forest, but they can't tell you about the last time they went out in the woods and watched the leaves move."

Communing with nature has lifelong benefits for your kids. Outdoor play in green spaces helps develop healthier cognition, a more robust imagination, dexterity, and emotional and physical strength.

So bundle your little tykes into the car and get them to the park on a regular basis. Start now to grow your kids' appreciation for the natural world and you'll have happier, healthier children. And the positive effects being surrounded by nature will have on your own psyche won't hurt either.