Imagine a time when children no longer play outdoors, when their laughter disappears from woods and fields, when they no longer know the wonder and joy of nature. For many children, that time is now. Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* reveals why children (and the rest of us) need direct experience with nature and includes new research that shows the necessity of direct experience in nature to healthy development.

**NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER**

As described by Louv, “nature-deficit ‘disorder’ is not a medical diagnosis, but a description of the human costs of alienation from nature. Among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. This disorder damages children; it also shapes adults, families, whole communities, and the future of nature itself. Yet, exciting new studies show us the benefits -- biological, cognitive and spiritual -- when we give the gift of nature.”

**DISCONNECT FROM NATURE**

Competition from television and computers, more homework and other time pressures, and lack of access to natural areas is keeping kids indoors. While technology is expanding our access to the virtual world, it is diminishing our children’s access to the physical world in a multitude of ways. Fear plays a large part in this – fear of traffic, of crime, of stranger-danger and of nature itself. The number of child abductions by strangers has been falling. But fear dominates family life. The boundaries of children’s lives are growing ever tighter. A 1991 study of three generations of nine-year-olds, found that, between 1970 and 1990, the radius around the home where children were allowed to roam on their own had shrunk to a ninth of what it had been in 1970.

Parents not only fear strangers – but the outdoor air itself. Indoor air pollution is the nation’s number one environmental threat to health — and it’s from
two to 10 times worse than outdoor air pollution, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. We’ve tried to recreate nature in artificial environments, but these aren’t necessarily healthy. Pediatric Nursing journal reports that indoor ball pit playgrounds at the fast food restaurants can spread serious infectious diseases.

“I like to play indoors better ’cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are,” reports a fourth-grader. Never before in history have children been so plugged in—and so out of touch with the natural world.”

THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE

As children’s connections to nature diminish and the social, psychological, and spiritual implications become apparent, new research shows that nature can offer powerful therapy for such maladies as depression, obesity, and attention-deficit disorder. Experience in nature can increase a child’s (and an adult’s) powers of concentration. In addition, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that creativity is stimulated by childhood experiences in nature. Environment-based education dramatically improves standardized test scores and grade-point averages and helps children develop skills in problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making.

RECONNECTING CHILDREN WITH NATURE

What you do is less important than how you do it. One of the most important gifts to give a young person is an infectious enthusiasm for the outdoors. This gift will last for the rest of a child’s life – long after the video games have disappeared.

Some ideas for making a difference in a child’s life today:

❖ First, rediscover your own nature connection. If you missed out on nature when you were a kid, now’s your chance. Consider the traditional nature activities: gardening, hiking, fishing.

❖ Go backyard birding; collect bugs; look for animal tracks. In the spring, catch tadpoles, transfer them to an aquarium and watch them transform into frogs — then return the frogs to the wild.

❖ Get to know a ten-square-yard area at the edge of a field, pond, or pesticide-free garden. Look for the edges between habitats: where the trees stop and a field begins, where rocks and earth meet water. Life is always at the edges.

❖ Keep a nature journal; sketch leaves or clouds – or frogs. Later, at home, color the drawings and press a flower between the pages, and add details about the weather. Or write a tale from the point of view of the bee.

❖ If you live in an inner-city neighborhood grow a roof or window box garden; plant seeds for the plants that provide nectar, and roosting and nesting sites for animals.

❖ Wildcraft: gathering of plants in their wild state, for food, crafts, and collections.