

WHY KIDS IN NATURE NOW?

By Cliona O'Callaghan

Have you ever caught fireflies in a jar to watch them glow? Have you spent time lying in a field watching the cloud parade? Have you wiled away hours building a fort in the woods, or damming a stream, or exploring tidal pools? For more and more children the answer may be “No, never.” Computers, television, electronic games, videos, electronic communications, and packed schedules all compete for the time that kids used to have to wander into nature

Does this childhood “nature deficit” matter? (Richard Louv “Last Child in the Woods”) A growing chorus of educators, scientists and other professionals respond emphatically, “Yes! “ “Nature is important to children’s development in every major way – intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and physically.” (www.childrenandnature.org) Childhood experiences in and with nature create a host of benefits. Connecting kids with their natural environment can enhance creativity, improve physical and mental well being, and create lasting impressions that will affect the way they see the natural world as adults.

Unstructured play in nature stimulates the imagination. Nature is interactive and ever changing, stimulating all a child’s senses in a way that a videogame can’t match. Moreover, a growing body of research indicates that play in nature promotes healthy kids both in mind and body. Outdoor play increases fitness levels and improves critical body balance, agility and the building of healthy bones. Recent science links activity in nature with decreases in the growing problems of childhood obesity, asthma, and myopia. Outdoor activity also helps prevent vitamin D deficiency, which is associated with a host of serious medical ailments. Even more striking, studies have shown that unstructured play in nature can improve attention and decrease stress in children. Green outdoor activity has been shown to reduce significantly the symptoms of attention deficit disorder in children

So why kids in nature now? Because it may be one of the healthiest decisions we can make for our children and a vital gift to our planet. Our organization, the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children, has launched a campaign committed to connecting the children of Illinois with nature. Will you join us?