

The Importance of Connecting Children to the Natural World

With Spring being on the horizon, we love taking this time to remind parents of the importance of connecting to nature. We all know that taking time to enjoy nature is good for us and our children but all too often we get too busy with our day to day tasks to prioritize it in our lives. If we can be reminded of the why, then maybe it will jump up on that priority list.

Why?

Mental Health

In speaking with parents, one of their top priorities for their children is to be happy and healthy. When you really dive into the benefits of integrating nature regularly into their lives this helps to check off that wish.

- Nature can serve as a way to find **flow**. According to Wikipedia, “Flow is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. Flow is characterized by complete absorption in what one does.” It is hard to climb, mountain bike, raft or even ski without fully concentrating on that moment. Flow brings a sense of calm and focus to the mind, which we could all argue is a welcomed state in this fast-paced world we live in.
- It supports a **connection** to others and to something that is bigger than oneself. When our children can get out of their heads to acknowledge that there is amazing beauty around them it helps to get them out of their own possible negative thoughts. This can help promote a feeling of gratitude, which can help ease feelings of sadness or hopelessness.
- Many child psychologists talk about the **importance of sleep** for our developing children. Nature promotes healthy sleep patterns by exposing you to natural sunlight along with the added benefits of getting exercise and movement outside.
- A significant amount of research has been done in children to show that spending time outdoors decreases the chances of developing near-sightedness, also known as myopia, in developing eyes. In addition, it helps **cognitive functioning** of the brain and improves the ability to focus.

21st Century Skills

Pat Bassett, past president of NAIS – National Association of Independent Schools was one of the first to talk about the skills that companies would be looking in their hiring process. He came up with the **five C's: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication and Character**. As we watch our campers and staff experience nature, we strongly feel that experiences with nature promote development in these 21 Century skills.

- **Critical Thinking/Problem Solving:** All too often the answer is at our fingertips. In the backcountry you cannot always have this luxury and you cannot google to find the answers. This encourages people to dig deep and use their own knowledge of the situation and their own judgement. There are huge advantages to developing this needed skill of problem solving. Tom Kersting, author of “*Disconnected, How to Reconnect with our Digitally Distracted kids*” reports

that GPS, spell check, and other technologies are actually changing the makeup of our brains. We don't have to solve problems on our own anymore.

- **Collaboration:** It is inherent in outdoor activities to have to work together. Take a backpacking trip for instance, one must split up the equipment in order to get it up the hill. If you watch a group of children sledding; they work together to build a jump, tweak it and improve it. There is a chance they will argue or disagree. But it is important to offer these opportunities for growth without adults interfering.
- **Creativity:** Giving children unstructured time to play in nature fosters creativity. A couple of years ago we made a shift in the message we were giving our out-camping counselors. We used to say, have an outlined plan of activities for your camping trip. We then came to the realization that children are so seldom given the chance to create activities for themselves that are kid lead. Making this shift gave our campers time to build forts, fairy houses, dams in the streams and boats. It was amazing to see what they came up with. What better way to teach engineering?
- **Communication:** Tom Kersting makes the case that screen overuse has caused the greatest impact on children's emotional development than anything else in history. When face to face communication is replaced by a handheld device the ability to read emotions will diminish. When you have the chance to unplug and work together in nature you are supporting children in communicating face to face.
- **Character:** There are a handful of outdoor activities that help to build character, hiking, backpacking, climbing, mountain biking etc. Anytime a child has the chance to push through an uncomfortable situation, they walk a little taller, know they can thrive and gain confidence in who they are. As parents we have the urge to keep our children from discomfort, but they need to realize that they can push through it. Outdoor activities offer opportunities to be in a state of discomfort.

Bonuses

- Your child will **gain skills** that they cannot learn elsewhere. How to build a fire, how to care for blisters, how to prepare for changes in weather, etc.
- You will help in raising a generation that will **protect our public lands**. Rocky Mountain National Park has made the correlation that visiting national parks is passed down through generations. The chance of raising a generation that will vote and prioritize our public lands increases if they have spent time in those spaces. We would argue that this feels like a pretty important reason to incorporate more nature into your lives.

How?

Again, it is our hope that if you can see the "why" then hopefully you and your family can look at how you can integrate more nature into your lives. If this idea is new to you then start with something from the green slope, if you are wanting to take it up a notch then tackle something from the Double Diamond list.

Green slope (easy effort)

- Make it a priority when choosing your children's activities, have someone else immerse your child in nature - St Anne's in the Hills Summer Trip is an easy choice. It is with teachers and other St Anne's kids that you know.
- Take a day trip to the foothills for a family hike.
- Take a family ski day without phones/earbuds. Make it a blue if you soak up some extra vitamin Ds and eat lunch outside.
- Pick a day for the whole family to be unplugged and take a nature walk on the canal without headphones.
- Go for a family walk when the moon is full.

Blue slope (intermediate effort)

- Let your children explore in nature without you.
- When the weather is nice let them ride their bike to school with a group of friends.
- Go play in the park and offer unstructured time. Make up a new game rather than play soccer, lax, football, etc.
- Engage Grandparents. If you are lucky enough to have active grandparents, then get them engaged in your goal for more "green time" for your family. They often have more time and remember a day when children were outside more.
- This summer encourage your children to camp in the back yard.
- Do an exercise with your children of just sitting in nature and use all your senses at the same time.
- Go fishing and make it about the adventure, not catching a fish.

Black Diamond (expert effort)

- Go camping with your family. This does take some planning and gear, but it will be worth the effort.
- Go on a backpacking trip. Again, you will need to pick a date and reserve a campsite, but your children will love it.
- Plan a trip with a company like, Under the Canvas or go on a vacation to a National Park
- Send your child to an extended sleepaway camp/Outward Bound/Wilderness Adventures
- Travel to a foreign country and allow children to figure out how to navigate.
- Encourage your children to build a treehouse in the summer or an Igloo in the winter.

So now that you know the why and how to get back into nature, let's get outside!

Thank you,

Brooke Klebe Cheley & Jeff Cheley

Directors at Camp Cheley

More Information:

Some startling statistics from a Colorado News story <https://denver.cbslocal.com/2020/01/30/young-people-not-cool-outdoors-boulder-colorado-study/>

Other sources

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/26/health/nature-makes-children-happier-wellness/index.html>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/scientific-benefits-of-nature-outdoors-2016-4/>

