

Getting Lost in the Great Indoors

Many Adults Worry Nature Is Disappearing From Children's Lives

By Donna St. George
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Tuesday, June 19, 2007; A01

Linda Pelzman appreciates the beauty of the outdoor world, sometimes pulling her children into the yard to gaze at a full moon or peer into a dense fog. An educator and founder of a summer camp, she only wishes her enthusiasm was fully shared.

On a recent nature walk near her home in [Gaithersburg](#), her younger son, 6, was unimpressed, pleading, "I just want to go back to civilization." Her older son, at 13, has made it clear he prefers PlayStation.

"Kids don't think about going outside like they used to, and unless there is some scheduled activity, I don't think they know what to do outdoors anymore," Pelzman said.

Pelzman's view is shared by a growing number of children's advocates, environmentalists, business executives and political leaders who fear that this might be the first generation of "indoor children," largely disconnected from nature.

Concerns about long-term consequences -- affecting emotional well-being, physical health, learning abilities, environmental consciousness -- have spawned a national movement to "leave no child inside." In recent months, it has been the focus of [Capitol Hill](#) hearings, state legislative action, grass-roots projects, a [U.S. Forest Service](#) initiative to get more children into the woods and a national effort to promote a "green hour" in each day.

Tomorrow 40 civic leaders -- representing several governors, three big-city mayors, [Walt Disney Co.](#), Sesame Workshop, [DuPont](#), the gaming industry and others -- will launch a campaign to raise \$20 million that will ultimately fund 20 initiatives across the country to encourage children to do what once seemed second nature: go outdoors.

"If we really want to make a difference in this area, we need a shift in the culture," said Larry Selzer, president of the [Conservation Fund](#), which organized the alliance of leaders.

Advocates and researchers have been aware of the downturn in outdoor activity for a long time, and it has been documented by experts such as Sandra Hofferth, a family studies professor at the [University of Maryland](#). From 1997 to 2003, Hofferth found, there was a decline of 50 percent, from 16 to 8 percent, in the proportion of children 9 to 12 who spent time in such outside activities as hiking, walking, fishing, beach play and gardening. Organized sports were not included as an outdoor activity in the study, which was based on detailed time diaries.

Hofferth's study also showed an increase in computer play time for all children and in time spent on television and video games for those ages 9 to 12. And it found increases in sleep time, study time and reading time.

The increased activism has been partly inspired by a best-selling book, "Last Child in the Woods," and its author, Richard Louv.

Coining the term "nature deficit disorder," Louv has argued that indoor kids are more prone to a range of childhood problems, including obesity, depression and attention disorders. He contends that they miss out on the spiritual, emotional and psychological benefits of exposure to the wonders of nature, including reduced stress and improved cognitive development, creativity and cooperative play.

"I'm not saying that a child who grows up without nature is going to have terrible problems," Louv said, "but if you look at the studies that show what nature does give kids, it's unfortunate that so many children are missing out on that."

With this generation of children, he said, "I think we're going to pay a price if we don't turn this around."

His views have touched a nerve -- in an era when people tell stories of backyard play sets that are barely used and children who are so accustomed to playing video games that they use their thumbs to ring doorbells or dial phones.

At the [National Wildlife Federation](#), Kevin Coyle, vice president for education, said Louv's book attached a name and a framework to a phenomenon everyone knew existed but no one had quite articulated.

Coyle's group, which publishes Ranger Rick and Your Big Backyard magazines, looked for a way to take the next step. It started promoting the "green hour" -- and the idea that children need a casual hour outdoors each day in the same way they need a good night's sleep or a vitamin.

At least 30 grass-roots efforts have been started across the country in the past two years -- focusing on legislation, nature centers, nature-based preschools, community open space and other matters, said Amy Pertschuk, managing director of the Children & Nature Network, which was co-founded by Louv.

In [Connecticut](#), state officials launched a No Child Left Inside program last year that, among other things, allows foster families to use state parks free and encourages families to visit parks through a contest called the Great Park Pursuit.

All of this is so new that most parents don't know it exists -- although many have been quietly waging their own battles against the demise of unstructured outdoor time.

Jolene Ivey, a mother of five sons in Cheverly and a Democratic member of the [Maryland House of Delegates](#), said she makes a point of buying her children outdoor toys and games -- a trampoline for a Christmas gift, some squirt guns for the summer.

She has not bought video game systems. Her 9-year-old's preoccupation with the computer is enough trouble. When she walks into her house, she said, she does not even check to see whether he is playing on it. She just says, "Troy, get off the computer!"

Experts suggest a major factor in the decline of outdoor time is parental fears about leaving children unattended -- aggravated by excessive media coverage of horrific crimes.

Changes in family life have also had an influence: more mothers in the workforce, more structured playtime, more organized sports. Fewer hours are left for kids to slip out the back door and play hide-and-seek, catch fireflies, skip stones, create imaginary worlds around makeshift forts.

According to a [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) study, children 8 to 18 spend 6.5 hours a day on television, electronic games, computers, music and other media, with many multitasking electronically. For many, the virtual world has become a more familiar setting than the natural one.

In [Great Falls](#), the Hefner family has a back yard of more than an acre, a green swath of kid heaven at the edge of Great Falls National Park. Three years ago, George Hefner, a general contractor who knows how to work a saw, built a two-story "treehouse" that stands on the ground between two leafy maples.

He imagined his children fixing it up, sleeping there.

But 10-year-old Paul cannot remember the last time he played in the little house. "Animals live out there, you know," he told his mother one day. His older sister Sarah, 16, admits that she has never set foot in it. "What would I do in a treehouse?" she asked.

No one in the family uses the yard very often, said Paula Hefner, Paul's mom. After school, there is the duty of homework and the lure of the computer, the television, instant messaging, text messaging, [iPods](#), [Legos](#).

"The kids are all physically active in sports, but when they come home, it's inside time," Paula Hefner said.

That changed two months ago, when Paul started hiking with his [Boy Scout](#) troop and his parents noticed how much he liked it. Mom and son decided to start hiking in the nearby national park every Monday, when Paul's school lets out early.

"I like seeing the falls and stuff," Paul said.

Paula said, "It's a great time, not just for the green time" but also for the time together.

Their experience fits with what may need to happen more broadly -- a deliberate approach to reconnecting children with the outdoors, Louv said.

Marguerite Kondracke, president of [America's](#) Promise Alliance, which calls itself the nation's largest organization of groups focused on children, said the change in how children spend their leisure time is more dramatic than most people recognize and can lead to problems such as obesity and depression.

"I believe this has happened so gradually," she said, "that we as adults don't realize what's taken place. . . . I think we as a nation need to wake up to this."