

Parent pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 8 No. 9 • May 2009

Thinking outside the house

Aaaaah, the lazy days of summer are nearly here—days of building forts, swimming at the pool, long bike rides, and loosely organized neighborhood games of tag.

Wait a minute. Does that describe our children's summer experience or is it a better description of what we remember from our youth? Between cable TV, video game systems, and computers, do our children experience much of the outside world?

"It's a beautiful day outside. Get out there and enjoy it!"

Richard Louv, a nationally acclaimed speaker and journalist, coined the term "nature deficit disorder." He asserts that while this is not a medical diagnosis, there is plenty of research to suggest that our children do not spend enough time outside.

This change in childhood play habits has been partly responsible for diminished use of senses, attention difficulties (including ADHD and ADD), and higher rates of emotional and physical illness including childhood obesity. While sending your children out to play for the day will not cure or completely prevent these issues, the research is clear that children benefit in many ways from

outdoor experiences.

More time outside, playing, exploring, and learning will enhance the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual strengths of your child.

"You say you have nothing to do? You can always weed the garden or mow the lawn!"

It's hard to know if our parents pushed us outside for our benefit or for theirs, but they certainly had good instincts. Once we have protected our children from bugs and UV rays, there are many benefits to spending time in nature. Here are four for your consideration:

■ **Children who play outside are more likely to find neighborhood friends.**

This gives ample opportunity to practice and refine social skills. Fighting over a video

game is just not the same as fairly recruiting members for a team, exploring a wooded area, or building a fort. Outdoor activities require compromise and negotiation, initiation and cooperation. The possibilities are endless and real, not virtual like on a computer.



■ **Playing outside encourages the use of all senses.**

When you watch TV or play a video game, you are using only hearing and sight. When you are outside, there are things to see, hear, smell, touch, and maybe even taste (there is nothing like sugar snap pea pods picked fresh from the garden!).

Being outside brings a child's brain alive with possibilities for learning and experiencing. All of this learning will be essential to classroom learning when the school year begins again. Children with a variety of experiences have more to which they can connect their learning. A science textbook will certainly make more sense after a summer of exploring God's world.

■ **It is essential to learning for children to be able to process information from all of their senses.**

If one sense or the other is neglected, then changes happen in the brain. If your child has the ability to use all senses, those senses should be exercised regularly.

God made our world for us to enjoy. The more time we spend there, and the more we learn about it, the more we foster gratitude for what our heavenly Father has given us.

A Growing Christian Makes the Best Parent!

Children playing outside are learning how to process information, make observations, test theories, synthesize new information with what is known and solve problems.

All these skills are essential to emotional and intellectual health. Few of them are supported by TV or video games

■ **Nature has a calming affect.**

There is something about stimulating all the senses that calms down the brain and the body so the processing of sensory information can be accomplished. Much the same way that a crying baby can often be soothed by a trip outside, our school-age children experience this same effect when they go through the door.

This of course does not apply to raucous touch football games or fights over who controls the water hose strung out to the wading pool. Still, almost any activity that happens outdoors will do a better job of using up energy and producing a calm weariness.

“Here is a glass jar for your bug collection; now, what exactly do you need the drill for?”

With summer just around the corner, now is the time to set guidelines with your family and encourage more outdoor activity. Think about the fun you had outdoors as a child and look for opportunities in your yard, neighborhood, and community.

The good news is that outdoor experiences are cheap, easy, and in close proximity. This should fit nicely in the family budget. Here are suggestions:

■ Check your outdoor supplies. Make sure you have bug spray, hats, sunglasses, and sunscreen to keep the kids safe. What kinds of toys lend themselves to outdoor play? Anything that helps you dig in the dirt, explore nature, or play in water is good.

You might want a secret stash of water pistols and sidewalk chalk to offer when the children have run out of ideas. Prepare yourself for complaints about heat. Pour juice into paper cups and cover with plastic wrap. Stick in a craft stick and freeze. You will be ready when your sweaty children need a break.

■ Plant a garden with your children. If you don't have enough backyard space, then consider a container garden. Pots full of dirt can be a great way for children to grow flowers or vegetables. Taking care of the garden develops great self-regulation skills, and the plants will provide many learning opportunities.

■ Camping is a great family activity, but it can be done just as easily in your own backyard. Set up a tent (or build one with chairs and blankets), pack up sleeping bags, snacks, and a picnic supper. Don't forget the flashlights!

■ Schedule family walks and bike rides. Check in your community for events that involve walking or biking teams. Many charity organizations do fundraising with walks. Your family could be getting exercise, good family time, and a memorable outdoor experience while benefiting a charity.

■ Tell stories around the dinner table about your childhood nature adventures. Encourage your children to interview aunts, uncles, and grandparents about their favorite outdoor memories. This will be a great source of possibilities for your family and will allow you to relive happy times.

■ Check outside your city or town for farms that allow you to pick your own crops. These apples, strawberries, corn, or other fruits and vegetables will taste fantastic and will encourage your children to a healthier diet.

■ Make seasonal visits to a favorite nature space to note the changes. Document the changes with drawings or journal entries. Check out field guides from the library that will help you identify local flora and fauna.

■ Designate a “wonder” box for children to collect and examine treasures from the outdoors. Make inexpensive cameras available for picture taking. On rainy days, your child can examine favorite bits of nature or make a scrapbook.



■ Set a goal to learn about insects, rocks, birds, trees, cloud formations, and/or stars. These are all topics near and dear to most children's hearts, and the study of them will give you many opportunities to point out how wonderful God is.

■ Schedule a daily green hour when all family members are outside together.

“Shut that door! We're not air conditioning the whole backyard, you know!”

Discovering the outdoors is also a spiritual exercise. God made our world for us to enjoy. The more time we spend there, and the more we learn about it, the more we foster gratitude for what our heavenly Father has given us.

When we are content with what God gives us, we lose the secularly imposed need to collect things. With God's help, and a little effort, we can find ourselves shouting:

“Kids, its time to come in, now, and take a bath!”

For Discussion:

- ▶ What do you remember about outside activities as a child?
- ▶ What did your parents do outside?
- ▶ What does your child enjoy doing outside?
- ▶ What family activities do you currently enjoy outside?
- ▶ What could you add to that list?

For Further Study:

- ▶ *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv
- ▶ The Natural Wildlife Federation has a great Web site full of outdoor activities:
www.greenhour.org

“Parent Pages” is published by LCMS District and Congregational Services—School Ministry

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; 800-248-1930; www.lcms.org

Kim Marxhausen, Lincoln, Neb., Writer • Frank Kohn, Editor and Layout

Vol. 8, No. 9 • May 2009