

# Green Spaces for Our Children

by Amara Cocilovo



**t**ake a moment to recall your childhood. Imagine what playtime meant to you.

If it was anything like mine, it included exploration of ditches and river banks and the grasses below trees in search of bugs, horny toads, snakes, pretty rocks, or any other treasure deemed worthy of collection. It included making forts out of trees; not so much building tree houses as adopting trees that naturally grew in such a way as to provide protective shelters. I could stay within the safety of their branches for hours, the game depending on imagination, company, and whatever possessions made it into my knapsack on any given day.

Little did I know, and likely little did my parents know, that my afternoon play sessions may have been responsible in part for my hearty immune system, my scholastic successes, and my kinship with nature as an adult.

Luckily, authors like Richard Louv (*Last Child in the Woods: Protecting Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*), David Sobel (*Place Based Education: Connection Classrooms to Communities*), David Orr (*Earth in Mind: On Education, the Environment, and the Human Prospect*), and others are bringing this issue to the forefront modern thought about healthy childhood development.

Louv considers quality nature experiences to be of equal importance as good nutrition and adequate sleep, saying, "The quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level." Some of the benefits of nature exposure (according to studies reviewed in *Last Child in the Woods*) are better academic achievement, improved concentration, higher self-esteem, better coordination and motor skills, lower rates of anxiety and depression, improved interpersonal skills, and speedier recovery times. Of specific interest to many healthcare professionals and concerned parents, outdoor experiences have also shown to decrease the symptoms of ADD/ADHD. One study presented the idea that, "Greenery in a child's everyday environment, even views of green through a window, specifically reduces attention-deficit symptoms." In David Sobel's book *Place Based Education*, he observes, "Children who participate in an education program called 'Outdoors in all Weather' suffer from 80 percent fewer infectious diseases than children in conventional indoor programs." Although any time spent in the natural world is time well spent, most studies have shown that an ongoing pattern of nature exposure is necessary to illicit positive results.

It is obvious that children these days are not getting the nature exposure that pre-

vious generations have had. In fact, the average American child spends upwards of 30 hours a week looking at some sort of electronic screen (television, computer monitor, etc.). The strong technological lure coupled with an increased sense of "stranger danger" (fear of strangers causing harm to oneself or one's child) is resulting in something David Orr of the Orion Society refers to as "ecophobia." This non-specific fear of the natural world results from a lack of positive nature experiences and serves to limit children's innate curiosity about the world around them. However, there is still time to reverse these trends, and it is not as challenging as we might think.

There are most definitely different levels of what one might call "nature." We have to admit that a manicured lawn is very different from an open field, which is again different from a wild forest area. Children are accustomed to parks and playgrounds with clean boundaries and minimal "wild" spaces, and these areas illicit a specific type of play. Specifically, they generally encourage hierarchical play structures and competitive games. Naturalized play areas that are unkempt and diverse stimulate curiosity and encourage a different kind of play. Louv reports that studies done in Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the United States have shown that "wild" areas encourage more creative forms of play based on inventiveness, language skills, and imagination. Because physical competition is not so prominent in natural play spaces, they tend to reduce such antisocial behaviors as bullying, vandalism, and violence. Also, natural obstacles serve to literally slow the course of children's play, leading to reportedly fewer "knock-and-bump" accidents.

All this, and there's still more! Not only is outdoor play good for our children; it's good for our environment! Studies have shown that most adults who actively care for our earth began as children who were curious about their natural surroundings. If children are not exposed to the natural world, they will develop no kinship with it and will be far less likely to develop environmental sensibilities in their adulthood. Now more than ever, perhaps, we need citizens to take active roles in environmental protection, and we are reliant on future generations to carry the torch.

As parents, educators, and community members, it is up to us to provide opportunities for nature experiences. Parents who enjoy time in nature make for children who appreciate their natural surroundings. While it is undeniably important for children to experience the vast natural diversity of allocated nature preserves (some of my local favorites are Crowley Museum and Nature Center, Myakka State Park, and Emerson Point), a simple stroll through the neighborhood can generally provide some occasion for curiosity and observation as well. Try exploring empty lots, ditches, the wild edges around playgrounds, the above-ground root structures of trees... You may be surprised at the diversity you'll find!

**In addition to being the Children's Program Coordinator for Efest 2007, Amara Cocilovo is the program director at Crowley Museum and Nature Center, an educator at the South Florida Museum, a licensed massage therapist, and a lover of nature. She can be reached at [efest-kids@hotmail.com](mailto:efest-kids@hotmail.com).**

