



Policy Action Bulletin: Nature, Children and Families: A Necessary Connection

Background

For decades, environmental educators, conservationists, naturalists and others have worked, often heroically, to bring more children to nature—usually with inadequate support from policymakers. Since 2005, a number of convergent trends, including an intensified awareness of the relationship between human well-being, the ability to learn, and environmental health, as well as concern about child obesity, and the national media attention to nature-deficit disorder, are bringing the concerns of these veteran advocates before a broader audience.

One of those trends is a growing effort to transform concern into action. On April 24, 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, published in 2005, called for a nationwide campaign to “Leave No Child Inside” and a movement to reconnect children and nature.

Today, nearly two years after the Press Club event, public awareness may have reached a tipping point. The issue is garnering more media attention than ever. In November 2006, *USA Today* reported in a page-one story: “A back-to-nature movement to reconnect children with the outdoors is burgeoning nationwide.” By June 2007, the movement had been reported in the pages of *The Economist* and other European-based publications and had reached the front page of the *Washington Post*. By the end of 2007, *USA Weekly* had published a cover story feature for its weekend supplement, reaching 47.5 million readers through 600 newspapers. The World Future Society ranked nature-deficit disorder as the fifth-most-important trend (on a list of 10) that would shape 2007 and the years to come. As the movement continues to grow at the state and regional levels, so too will public consciousness—and action.

Excerpt from Children & Nature Network, Community Action Guide, <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>

MCFR’s Role

MCFR’s mission is to “strengthen all families by educating and supporting family professionals and promoting connections among those involved in research, policy and practice.” This Policy Action Bulletin grew out of the MCFR Spring conference, *Nature, Children and Families: A Necessary Connection Professional Research and Practice Symposium*, held on April 4, 2008. Visit www.mcfr.net for a conference summary.

Key Questions

- To what extent – and in what ways - are children spending time outside today and why does this matter?
- How does contact with nature foster healthy child development?
- What barriers do families experience that keep them from spending time in nature?
- How can we encourage families to connect more with nature?
- What research is available to guide action on this topic? What is the state of the evidence?
- How can we make this research easily accessible to parents, professionals and policy makers?

Research and Informational Links

- "An Interview with Andrea Faber Taylor," *Conversations with Kathleen Dunn, Wisconsin Public Radio*, Tuesday, May 15, 2007, <http://www.lhhl.uiuc.edu/media.htm>
- Children and Nature Network: Building a Movement to Connect Children and Nature, <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>
- Children & Nature Network Research and Studies – Volume 1 February 2007, <http://www.childrenandnature.org/index.php?/research/volumes/C16/16>
- Children & Nature Network Research and Studies – Volume 2 June 2007, <http://www.childrenandnature.org/index.php?/research/volumes/C42/42>
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Landscape and Human Health Laboratory Current and Past Research. <http://www.lhhl.uiuc.edu/research.htm>

Action Steps

For practitioners

- become better informed about nature learning and the benefits it offers to children.
- strive to provide children with access to the out-of-doors for significant amounts of time every day for both intentional learning experiences and unstructured play.
- enact policies (e.g., standards) that support a broad and nature-integrated curriculum that is multi-disciplinary, multi-sensory, and emergent.
- plan specific activities related to learning about the natural world every day.
- expose children to men and women who work in scientific or related fields (e.g., naturalists, geologists, biologists, nature writers).
- plan nutrition education experiences that help children see the “roots to table” connections of the food they eat.
- encourage families and elders to share their oral traditions, cultural histories, and experiences to offer children stronger links to the land and to their families.
- collaborate with health professionals to promote greater understanding of the physical and mental health benefits of greater contact with the out-of-doors.
- continually emphasize with teacher candidates the importance of learning about the natural world and the role of nature learning experiences in their professional practice.
- assure that teacher candidates complete coursework that helps them understand how nature learning experiences can serve to unify many areas of the curriculum.
- work to diminish stereotypes that discourage females from engaging in science learning by acknowledging and capitalizing on their natural curiosity and skill to investigate and explore.

For policy leaders

- expand outreach to colleagues to inform them of the groundbreaking work underway in many communities around the world that brings the joy and discovery of the natural world back as a priority.
- form partnerships among stakeholders to develop and maintain nature learning settings and community projects (e.g., working together to transform an asphalt area into a natural space).
- promote the development or retrofitting of green schools and other community buildings so that children and their teachers can learn in places that both protect the environment and provide opportunities to be engaged in natural learning environments.

- require the provision of reasonable periods of outdoor time during each school day. This may include both time for recess and/or other unstructured active play, exploration, imaginative play or solitude, time to read, write, draw, and/or to carry out mathematic or scientific activities.
- revise and simplify playground standards ensuring that standards related to hazards are supported with credible research and have not become unnecessarily restrictive.
- collaborate with health professionals to promote outdoor play and the health benefits of greater contact with the outdoor environment.

For families

- Strive to provide children with access to the out-of-doors in some way every day.
- in so far as possible, select child care and education settings that offer access to naturalistic outdoor environments that regularly provide children access to the outdoors and that allow them unstructured time to explore, imagine, be messy and play.
- regularly organize family outings to local parks and other natural areas and plan vacations with opportunities to explore and play in the out-of-doors (instead of going to theme parks).
- select books to read to children that show characters in natural settings and that help develop deeper understandings of the importance of the natural world. Include books by nature writers, explorers, and scientists whose real life experiences are interesting and meaningful.

Source: *Re-Connecting the World's Children to Nature: Call to Action*, World Forum – Nature Action Collaborative for Children. For more information, visit: http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/nacc/call_to_action.php

Other Resources:

- Minnesota Children & Nature Connection, Minneapolis, Minnesota
www.childrenandnature.org/movement/detail/minnesota
Megan O'Hara, Regional Leader, 612-599-7625, megan.ohara1@gmail.com
- Children and Nature Network (C&NN): Building a Movement to Connect Children and Nature. *C&NN Community Action Guide: Building the Children & Nature Movement from the Ground Up*, <http://www.childrenandnature.org>.
- *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv
<http://richardlouv.com/last-child-woods>. In this influential work about the staggering divide between children and the outdoors, child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation—he calls it nature-deficit—to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.