Curing Nature-Deficit Disorder: How Environmental Education Helps Kids Learn

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Abstract
Walk into any public school and talk with the children about their experiences in nature and you will begin to see a pattern. Children have made few connections with the world around them. They do not spend much time outdoors and the time they do spend outdoors is not spent interacting directly with nature. Why does this matter? Look at these same kids and you will see another pattern emerging: Attention-Deficit Disorder, depression, obesity, emotional problems, etc. While not all of these problems are directly caused by a lack of interaction with the natural world, current research shows that there is a link. This study examines that research in an effort to prove the growing problem that author Richard Louv calls Nature-Deficit Disorder, as well as examining how educators can help fix it. Nature-Deficit Disorder, though not a real medical condition, epitomizes the collective problems rising from the child-nature gap in today’s schools.

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Begin environmental education for kids as early as possible. Children's attitudes toward living things develop at a young age and they will imitate the attitudes and actions toward caring for the environment that you model for them. They learn about nature through real interactions with it, not from filling out stacks of worksheets about nature. Once children have had opportunities to investigate what you bring into the classroom or find in the playground, they're motivated to ask questions, to look into their ideas further and/or are motivated to complete projects designed to share their new knowledge. Focus on one small part of the environment. As you model excitement about nature and caring for the environment, your students will become enthusiastic also. Nature-deficit disorder is the idea that human beings, especially children, are spending less time outdoors, and the belief that this change results in a wide range of behavioral problems. This disorder is not recognized in any of the medical manuals for mental disorders, such as the ICD-10 or the DSM-5. Richard Louv claims that causes for Nature-deficit disorder include parental fears, restricted access to natural areas, and the lure of electronic devices. Environmental education helps students understand their environment, builds knowledge and skills necessary to address complex environmental issues, and spurs action to keep our environment healthy and sustainable for the future. It combats “nature deficit disorder” ... and it’s FUN! Healthy lifestyles are encouraged. EE gets students outside and active, and helps address some of the health issues we are seeing today, such as obesity, attention deficit disorders, and depression. Good nutrition is often emphasized through EE and stress is reduced due to increased time spent in nature. Communities are strengthened. EE promotes a sense of place and connection through community involvement. Richard Louv: “Nature-deficit disorder” is not a medical diagnosis, but a useful term—a metaphor—to describe what many of us believe are the human costs of alienation from nature: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses, a rising rate of myopia, child and adult obesity, Vitamin D deficiency, and other maladies. Because researchers have turned to this topic relatively recently, most of the evidence is correlative, not causal. The research strongly suggests that time in nature can help many children learn to build confidence in themselves, calm themselves, and focus. JS: How can parents help kids care about nature when they live in urban environments without ready access to wild spaces?