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## **Eye on the Environment**

### **No Child Left Inside**

**By Melanie Parker**

On a recent winter day my three year old daughter insisted we pack up a picnic and head out into the “magical forest.” This mystical little spot exists along our driveway and is a tract of woods about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. I packed down the snow so that she could walk in the unstable snowpack on her own, and there, under the spruce trees she discovered oval shaped icy depressions.

“What are these mom?” she exclaimed.

“Hmm,” I said “Maybe we can find some clues!”

There frozen in the compressed snow she found tiny little hairs and then she noticed deer tracks coming and going from each of the five little spots we had found clustered together.

“I think they are deer beds mom...wow...can we pretend to be deer? I know...I’ll be the sister deer, John can be the brother deer, and you can be the mommy deer!”

And so it began, an hour and a half of laying in our snow suits in our respective deer beds and pretending to wake up, search for lichen to feed on, keep our eye out for mountain lions, and nap in our icy beds.

We watched squirrels shucking cones, heard ravens flying overhead, and talked about what it must be like to be deer living in our neighborhood. On the ‘hike’ back home, Kyra stopped to sculpt turtles and giant sea clams in the snow.

You wouldn’t necessarily think that children growing up in the Seeley-Swan are at any great danger of losing their connection to nature; we have such abundance all around us. But even here we are not immune from the national trend.

Our children are spending more and more of their time being entertained by computers, T.V., and high tech toys, and they are spending fewer and fewer hours of their lives outdoors. The national average right now is 30 minutes per week...the average child in America spends just two hours out of every month in unstructured play outdoors!

About four years ago, Richard Louv published the book *Last Child in the Woods*. In it, he coined the term ‘nature deficit disorder’ and made the case that American children were suffering greatly from this syndrome.

As the term implies, the decreasing time our children spend outdoors is strongly correlated to the increasing diagnosis of kids with attention deficit disorders. The increasing tendency to stay indoors is also leading to physical health issues like childhood obesity and diabetes, as well as mental health issues like anxiety and depression.

And religious leaders are quick to point out that a spiritual life begins with a state of wonder and is often inspired by experiences in nature. So our children’s increasing disconnect with the outdoors is degrading their mental, physical and spiritual well being.

Currently, there is a bit of a national buzz around this book, and more importantly, around this phenomenon. A loose coalition of teachers, parents and church leaders have banded together to form the No Child Left Indoors coalition. One of their main efforts is to bring experiential education back into the classroom, something that has suffered under the current test-centered focus on a limited number of subjects.

The coalition cites numerous studies regarding the increase in science test scores and other measures of academic achievement among children who's curriculum is grounded in experimentation and experience outdoors. The coalition is advocating for mandates and funding to increase nature-based learning in the public schools.

In addition, the coalition is calling on parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles to bring back the lost art of taking your kids outside. The problem isn't simply something that schools need to address. Just the simple act of taking a kid fishing for the afternoon could be a radical act that stands against the prevailing trend to plop all youngsters down in front of a screen and leave for awhile.

Among professional land managers, the national trend away from the outdoors is also becoming a major topic of discussion. Visitation to National Parks and National Forests is down and the number of hunters and anglers is on a steep decline across the country. Many conservation leaders fear that the nation's understanding of natural resources, and its desire to protect and sustain those resources is likewise diminishing.

But nature deficit disorder among our children is not just an environmental issue. Pediatricians are talking about it. Public health officials are talking about it. Psychologists are talking about it. Religious leaders, politicians, teachers and parents are talking about it. And as the dialogue continues, it seems to cut across many social divides to unite people behind a common purpose...getting kids back outdoors.

The deficit of time spent in nature results in:

Anxiety and depression  
Lower academic performance  
Health problems  
Diminished creativity  
Weakened land stewardship ethic

If you are anything like me, you see nature deficits creeping into your own life. I am spending more and more time behind the computer, on the phone, rushing to work, rushing home from work, and generally being distracted by all the gadgets in my life.

Watching my own children play outdoors, I can see immediate improvements in their ability to concentrate, to get along, to communicate, and to create. I am awestruck by them daily, and I am grateful for the opportunities that we have here in our little rural community to get our kids back outdoors.