

## Giving Nature Back to Our Children and Ourselves

by Fred First © 2007

A building that had once housed a sprawling grocery store was now a brightly-colored entertainment megaplex called the Children's Fun Palace. The parking lot was filled with cars. None of us knew what to expect when we walked through the doors on this first-ever visit, but it was obviously the place to be on a warm, April day in Rapid City.

Inside, the neon flashed and blinked. Bells and buzzers and stereo sirens blared. Toddlers in diapers wailed and their older brothers and sisters whined for more quarters. I wanted to turn and run, but we had come to show our grand daughter, Abby a good time. And thank God, she would have none of it.

Abby quickly became both overwhelmed and disinterested. "This is more like the Boring Palace" said the prescient five-year-old after just a few minutes of exposure to epileptic noise and lights, careening video race cars and raygun-wielding aliens.

Abby's mom, our daughter Holli, was apologetic. She'd heard other moms talk about this place as an opportunity to entertain, to reward, to kill a few weekend hours with their kids. Holli knew her parents from quiet banks of Goose Creek were not accustomed to this flood of artificial stimulation and too, that we preferred better than this for our only grand daughter's entertainment. So we went to the park a half mile away. And the parking lot there was empty.

Within five minutes, Abby had found the broken remnants of a tailless kite, and entertained herself (and us) for a delightful hour under the blue prairie sky.

That afternoon I witnessed in a most striking way the contrast between the old-fashioned play of children actively entertaining their bodies and imaginations in the out-of-doors, and the modern, physically-passive, over-stimulating kinds of "recreation" that happen to kids almost exclusively indoors and may involve use of the thumb muscles alone.

"I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are" explained one urban fifth grader.

Here is the status of our retreat to the comfortable indoors: "In a typical week, only 6 percent of children ages nine to thirteen play outside on their own. Studies by the National Sporting Goods Association and by American Sports Data, a research firm, show a dramatic decline in the past decade in such outdoor activities as swimming and fishing. Even bike riding is down 31 percent since 1995."



Have we lived beyond the days of free-range children at play? Have we successfully removed ourselves from nature at last? If the answer is yes, the costs of this sad development are staggering, even while the solutions may be close at hand.

Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* offers examples of the beneficial effects of reconnecting children with nature, not the least of which may be the reduction of symptoms typically associated with the rampantly-increasing condition of our times called ADHD. The numerous studies described in the book give impressive evidence that our children deal better with life when they encounter it directly through nature. So do their parents.

Louv makes the point that many of those who, in later life, harbor a deep appreciation for nature (some of whom go on to become conservationists or artists) often had moments of meaningful encounter with nature as children. I did. Didn't you?

And if our children are indifferent to the wonders, the beauty and serenity of nature, how can we expect their adult selves to care? If "the environment" for them as children meant only the temperature at the shopping mall, what difference will it make to protect it?

Ask almost anyone over fifty if outdoor play was important in their growing-up, and they'll recall fond and vivid memories of summer swimming holes and hide-and-seek in the woods; of winter skating on the pond behind the barn; of building forts and catching crawdads, of star-gazing or otherwise spending hours unsupervised in the outdoors. What will our children remember of this kind of play when they are fifty?

The good news: more and more agencies, organizations and municipalities are becoming part of the solution. The "Leave No Child Inside" campaign is just one example. Yellowstone National Park, the U. S. Forest Service and the National Audubon Society all have recently initiated programs like this to make children more at home in the outdoors.

Find out how your family, neighborhood or group can become part of the nature-child reunion.

Some resources include:

Children/Nature Network <http://tinyurl.com/2apz8p>

Richard Louv's Book: <http://tinyurl.com/ynpd3n>

Leave No Child Inside <http://tinyurl.com/2yyvps>

Nature Deficit / Orion / <http://tinyurl.com/yvx9mp>

