

Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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The Healing Outdoors

By: Lon Woodbury



The therapeutic value of wilderness is well documented. The popularity of wilderness therapy programs has been reported in my newsletter at www.strugglingteens.com for years. For example, Dr. Keith Russell has done extensive research that shows the positive impact of wilderness therapy.

Recently I ran across a couple of additional studies showing how wilderness therapy reduces the risk of homelessness among the young and is key in helping disordered eating problems. The studies showing the positive impacts of wilderness just keep piling up. Many wilderness professionals have told me that although the therapy is important, the most important healing element continues to be the wilderness, which of course includes a lot of physical exercise and fresh air found only in the outdoors.

However, it seems deeper than that. A recent poll of public elementary school principals conducted by Gallup and reported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation had, as one of its findings, that "the most unexpected opportunity to boost learning lies outside the classroom: on the playground at recess." The "principals overwhelmingly believe recess has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom."

It seems research is confirming the intuitive sense that just being outdoors is uplifting and helpful in many ways. Visits to national and state parks remain high, and activities that take people outdoors remain popular, such as camping, hiking, biking, skiing, fishing and many other sports. The outdoors, especially the wilderness, obviously fills a deep need in people. Otherwise, these activities would not be so popular.

With all this intuitive and research evidence showing that people need contact with the outdoors, it is a tragedy that when it comes to our children, we are allowing two fears to cut our children off from the outdoors, let alone the wilderness.

The first, from fear of predators, we are tending to restrict our children to indoor activities (like computers and video games) or closely supervised activities in the yard or on play dates. Pretty much gone, especially in urban areas, are children playing around the neighborhood or exploring surrounding outdoor areas on their own.

The other fear is that of lower achievement in school. With the push for greater academic achievement, recess and playgrounds are rapidly being eliminated, to allow for more time on academic work.

The irony is the research indicates that eliminating play time, and especially outdoor play time, reduces potential academic achievement. And, by over protecting our children from predators and keeping them indoors, something important and probably vital is missing from their lives.

How can we maintain a civilized society if we teach our children to automatically fear strangers, and teach them to ignore their internal need for regular consistent contact with the outdoors?

Richard Louv, in his book "Last Child in the Woods" coined a term that seems to describe this: Nature Deficit Disorder. He claims that many of the problems we have in our society, and especially among the young, can be traced to an increasingly unfulfilled need for experiencing the outdoors. Not only do these fears negatively impact emotional health, but they impact physical health as well, which includes the buzz topic of childhood obesity.

I think he is on to something.

> The man who will use his skill and constructive imagination to see how much he can give for a dollar, instead of how little he can give for a dollar, is bound to succeed.
>
> ~Henry Ford

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