

Children in the Outdoors: The Endangered Species

In the *Ecologist* (October, 2005) Edward Gill's article, "If You Go Down to the Woods," makes a case for the importance of restoring outdoor play for children. In part, he observed...

"...children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make them top of any conservationist's list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom. So does it matter that kids aren't playing outside as much these days?"



"Let's start with health, and specifically with childhood obesity. Here, everyone agrees: playing outside keeps kids thinner. Even the Government's own recent public health white paper accepts that the loss of opportunities for spontaneous outdoor play is one of the main causes of childhood obesity. Dr William Deitz, the leading US Federal Government expert on nutrition and physical activity, claims that play may be the 'magic bullet' experts have been searching for, saying in a *British Medical Journal* editorial, that 'opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity.'

"The physical benefits of outdoor play should come as no surprise. What's more remarkable is the growing evidence that children's mental health and emotional well-being is enhanced by contact with the outdoors, and that the restorative effect appears to be strongest in natural settings. Studies at the University of Illinois' Human-Environment Research Laboratory on children with Attention-Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder (ADHD) have shown that green outdoor spaces not only foster creative play and improve interactions with adults, they also relieve the symptoms of the disorder. Although research on the developmental significance of childhood engagement with nature is in its infancy, the researchers are convinced of the depth of the connection between children's well-being and the environment, claiming that contact with nature may be 'as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep'.



"The great thing about many natural places is that they are ideal environments for children to explore, giving them the chance to expand their horizons and build their confidence while learning about and managing the risks for themselves. These places are unpredictable, ever changing, and prone to the randomness of nature and the vagaries of the weather..."

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