

Connect with Nature this Summer: Why It's Helpful

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It's 11:00 a.m. Do you know where your kids are?

No, that's not a mistake. It is 11:00 a.m., not 11:00 p.m. When some of us were growing up and it was a Saturday morning or a summer day at 11:00 a.m., you could find many children digging in the dirt, investigating paths through the park, watching the ants build their homes, lying in the grass enjoying – and imagining -- the cloud formations, among many other outdoor exciting adventures. Today when you drive through neighborhoods, it is usually very quiet, without a child in sight.

What has changed? Many things.

One is the reality that children (all of us) have often become disconnected with nature; that can have serious consequences.

Several summers ago nearly 300 delegates from six continents gathered to share ideas on how to reconnect children around the world with nature. *The Working Forum on Nature Education: New Tools for Connecting the World Children with Nature* took place at the Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Nebraska. To address concerns about children's diminishing exposure to nature, the World Forum Foundation developed the Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC) and organized its first forum in 2006. Today more than 1,000 architects, community planners, educators and environmentalists are members of NACC. For information: www.worldforumfoundation.org.

At the same time, Richard Louv has become a well-known researcher and author who sounded the alarm about the health and societal costs of children's isolation from the natural world. In his 2006 book, *Lost Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Louv revealed a direct connection between the absence of nature in the lives of "wired" youth and its negative health and societal impacts, notably attention disorders, depression, and obesity. Louv, co-founder of the nonprofit Children & Nature Network (www.childrenandnature.org), is helping lead the drive for legislation in several states to support more outdoor experiences, as well as the federal No Children Left Inside Act, which would create incentives for schools and states to establish or expand nature programs.

Louv's work has been motivated, in addition to concrete research, by real-life anecdotes:

- A fourth grader's comment: "I like to play indoors better because that's where all the electrical outlets are."
- Summer camps of camping, hiking in the woods, learning about plants and animals, firelight stories have been replaced by camps of computer classes, weight loss, etc.

- Nature has become something to watch, consume, wear or ignore.
- Commercials showing new cars zooming along in spectacular scenery while the children watch a flipdown video screen inside the car, oblivious to the wonders outside their window.

Why should this concern us as catechists, as Catholic parents – in addition to the health and societal costs to today’s generation? Some of the many reasons:

- All of our theologians, including St. Thomas Aquinas, remind us that God has been revealed to us in several ways: through nature, in the Scriptures, and through one another. Before we had the gift of the Scriptures, there was nature. God was first, and is always, revealed, to us through God’s marvelous works of creation.
- The experience of taking time to appreciate nature evokes wonder; wonder is the starting point of all prayer.
- Naturalist Robert Michael Pyle has asked, “What is the extinction of a condor to a child who has never seen a wren?” What will happen in our future? Who will take seriously the Catholic social teaching to care for creation if we continue to lose our intimate connection with creation? Children become what they’ve grown up with. Will they care about creation, be responsible stewards, if there’s less and less immersion in it, no time to collect seashells, no leisurely family walks?

Practically what can be done – as individuals, as families – to stay connected with nature, to care for the world, since we are all part of God’s one creation? (Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist and coauthor with Fr. Thomas Berry of *The Universe Story*, has remarked, “It’s hard to believe that 13.7 billion years of creation has come down to people spending all their time at the mall.”) Just a few, of the innumerable things to do:

- Plant more trees and shrubs (using native species). You’ll be creating more habitats for birds and wildlife, as well as enjoying, nurturing, protecting nature.
- Read about the environment, ways to appreciate and protect it. Visit Dawn Publishing, www.dawnpub.com, one source for excellent books, such as *All Around Me, I See*; *When God Made the Tree*; and *Discover the Seasons*.
- Some mealtime (or in the car) sentence completions:
 - To me the earth is _____.
 - The earth would be beautiful if _____.
 - We can help save _____.
 - I experience God’s presence _____.
 - When I am alone with nature _____.

- To help save energy _____.
 - Litter should _____.
 - If animals could talk _____.
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- Volunteer. Participate in outdoor volunteer projects, such as beach cleanups or weeding the parish garden. Sign up for *Habitat for Humanity* or take your family on a service vacation locally or abroad.
 - Plan vacations that involve time in nature: camping, time in national parks, rather than only amusement parks, highly technological, simulated experiences.
 - Discuss ways to cut water waste at home, such as long showers, letting it run while brushing your teeth, cloth napkins, etc. (Log onto www.H2ouse.org and www.thinkoutsidethebottle.org.) Recycle, share magazines and newspapers, avoid plastic and Styrofoam containers, use reusable canvas bags for groceries, buy recyclable products, stop smoking, use public transportation or carpool, plant a tree and tend a garden (if food garden, share with others), turn off household appliances and lights when not in use, wash clothes in cold water, dry in sun or clean dryer filter every time.

“If we don’t understand creation correctly, we can’t hope to understand God correctly.” (Thomas Aquinas)

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