Reconnect Children and Nature

Dr. Melinda Wilder
Dr. Shirley Spangler
Melinda.wilder@eku.edu
Division of Natural Areas
www.naturalareas.eku.edu
Eastern Kentucky University
Richmond, KY
Today’s Children

- 31% play outdoors every day, compared to 70% of their parents (Clements, 2004)
- On average spend 30 minutes of unstructured time outdoors a week (Hofferth & Sandberg, 1999)
- Average 2 year old spends over 4 hours per day with television or computers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005)
Today’s Children

- 29% of two and three year olds have a TV in their room (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005)
- More that 80% of children under age 2 and more that 60% of children aged 2-5 do not have access to daily outdoor play (Coyle, 2007)
Why?
Why?

- Culture of Fear
  - 82% of mothers identified crime and safety concerns as one of the primary reasons for not allowing children to play outside
  - Ultraviolet rays
  - Wildlife or Insect-born disease
  - Forms of pollution
- Availability of electronic media
  - Virtual replacing the real
- Scheduled lifestyles
  - 25% less play time (1981 to 1997)
- Regulations
Benefits of Outside Play

- Contact with the natural world through outdoor play is necessary for growth and development of children
  - Physiology
  - Cognitive
  - Psychological/Emotional
  - Social
- Environmental benefits
Physiology Benefits

Childhood Obesity Rates

Texas 28%
Physiology Benefits

During preschool years:
- Highest levels of physical activity when outdoors
- Higher levels of physical activity delay onset of increasing body fat
- Gross motor activity more likely occur outdoors
- Play in outdoor natural areas on a daily basis increases balance, agility and coordination
Physiology Benefits

- **ADD/ADHD**
  - Outdoor activities in more natural settings led to a greater reduction in ADHD symptoms
  - Better able to concentrate after contact with nature

- **Other**
  - Children who spent more time outdoors were the less likely to
    - Develop myopia
    - Get sick
Cognitive Benefits

- Is necessary for optimal brain development in children
- Stimulates learning by engaging all 5 senses.
- Results in "profound differences" in children's attention capacities
- Is more likely to expose children to opportunities that require problem solving and higher order thinking
- Fosters more imaginative and creative play that promotes language and collaborative skills
- Improves awareness, reasoning and observational skills
Psychological/Emotional

- Daily contact with nature
  - Buffers the impact of stressful life events
  - Has the potential to minimize anxiety, depression, aggression and sleep problems
  - Helps develop eco-psychological—children’s sense of self in relation to the natural world

- Mood is affected by physical activity and exposure to sunlight.

- An indoor, sedentary childhood is linked to mental-health problems.
Social Benefits

- Provides more opportunities to learn social skills
- Reduces anti-social behavior such as violence, bullying and vandalism
- Fosters more positive feelings toward other children
- Aids in development of independence and autonomy
Environmental Benefits

- Significant childhood experiences rather than knowledge about the environment determine an adult's environmentally friendly behavior.

- Participation with “wild” nature before age 11 results in positive attitudes toward the environment.

- Children’s positive encounters with nature can lead to the development of an environmental ethic.
Action: Where

- Preschools/Childcare Centers
  - Ideal venues
  - Highest individual predictor of physical activity
- Naturalized Playgrounds
  - Level of vegetation influences incidence of play
Action: What Can You Do?

- Developmentally appropriate activities
  - Unstructured free play outdoors
  - Open ended discovery
  - Develop empathy toward and connectedness with the natural world
    - Animals

- Environment based/outside curriculum
- Nature Preschools
Connect

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Connect

PROJECT WET
Water Education for Teachers

Project WILD

PROJECT LEARNING TREE
A Sense of Wonder
by Rachel Carson
Photographs by Nick Kelsh
Many children...

delight in the small and inconspicuous.
A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood.

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.
If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in. Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted on the one hand with the eager, sensitive mind of a child and on the other with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by a life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge. In a mood of self-defeat, they exclaim, "How can I possibly teach my child about nature—why, I don't even know one bird from another!"
it is not half so important to know as to feel.