

**Nature Clubs for Families  
Breakout Session and Follow-up Session  
Session Notes Recorded by Dean Stahl  
C&NN 2008 Grassroots Gathering  
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Presenters were Ashley and Chip Donahue (KIVA), and C&NN's Amy Pertschuk. Facilitator was Mark Pertschuk.

*Chip and Ashley of Roanoke, Virginia, described their introductions to nature and their family's launch of Kids in the Valley, Adventuring. KIVA's "do it yourself, do it now" strategy to help families share excursions into the outdoors is an inspiration for C&NN's Nature Clubs for Families initiative. (See <http://www.childrenandnature.org/natureclubs>.) Amy provided background on the C&NN initiative, then encouraged participants to describe their own outreach efforts. In the follow-up session, Mark urged attendees to build on the Donahues' approach as well as other strategies presented in the breakout session to develop ways to extend the reach of family nature clubs.*

These key ideas emerged:

- Create a blockbuster families-in-nature toolkit (with resources to be determined) and leverage that with a public relations/marketing strategy and workshops. A small group should follow up regarding the toolkit's contents.
- Work to solve transportation problems so families without vehicles can participate.
- Use technology: Podcasts and digital cameras can be part of the toolkit or outreach program.

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"It's not people who have changed, it's the shift in cultural perception ... even my own parents are affected by 'stranger danger' and are afraid of their own neighborhood now." – Ashley Donahue

"We've been creating a small natural playground. So simple and very little money ... you can put the whole thing in a small pickup truck." – Mary Hardcastle

"Volunteer to read books that serve as springboards for specific nature activities." – Cliff Knapp

"Our motto is play, learn, volunteer." – Chip Donahue

"If we don't address the transportation issue, we're not going to get inner-city families." – Kellie Tharp

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Here are highlights of the two sessions:

### **Early motivation**

Chip recalled the day, at age nine or ten, when his own free-play era ended. He came home after playing outside and was greeted by a police officer. “My mom had called the police because she was so worried,” he said. From that juncture his attention began to shift to video games. Before long, “I remember getting winded going up stairs.”

Ashley: “It’s not people who have changed, it’s the shift in cultural perception; the people raised the same way are worried. ... It seemed such a disconnect, even my own parents are affected by stranger danger and are afraid of their own neighborhood now.” Her parents had allowed Ashley to roam freely, but worry now when their granddaughter plays a few feet away.

After hearing his wife’s stories, Chip said, and trying to find ways to get their children outside, “what drew us out was the idea of letterboxing.” Plastic containers hidden in a local park – in moss under a bench, in trees – so kids could hunt for and find letters. A kind of treasure hunt.

“My grandfather had always told me to see details in strangers, the colors of their eyes. So the kids were seeing details now too” in the park environment. Chip and Ashley wanted to continue that kind of exploration. “Mostly what I’ve done is allow myself to have a second childhood.”

An older man they saw frequently on the trails recommended Bill Bryson’s “A Walk in the Woods.” They read that, and then picked up “The Qwikipick Adventure Society” (by Sam Riddleburger), which they read to their kids, who decided they wanted to make an adventure club. “Then we picked up Richard’s book but didn’t even finish it when we decided to start the club,” Chip said.

Ashley: “Our five-year-old said we should invite everyone. It was a way to get kids together and give them a taste of what we had as children.” Chip called the local paper, and put together a year’s worth of itineraries in one night.

### **What the Donahues learned and advise**

- Plan outing dates well in advance because most parents schedule months ahead.
- The typical event lasts four hours, usually from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., one or two Saturdays a month. People first meet and greet, so they always have a table set up with resource materials (newsletters, book picks, good road music, regional information, ideas such as how to do letterboxing on your own, etc.).
- Every fourth Saturday is a volunteer event: waterway cleanup, litter pickup. “Our motto is play, learn, volunteer,” Chip said.
- Groups include newborns to fifth-graders.
- Parents stay with their children. The ad message Chip came up with for the local paper is: “Volunteer to make a memory with a child. No child care provided.”
- Always walk the area first to check terrain. Can strollers or backpack strollers go through? Is there something special to see? Be open to novelty, e.g. “an old, rusted-out ‘53 Chevy in the woods; that was big attraction for kids,” Chip recalled. (He later

searched newspapers and found it was from an old moonshine run. They didn't tell the kids, but the parents enjoyed the story.)

- Do a lot of hiking, and showcase local parks. Plan to picnic or bring snacks. Most parks people have been very encouraging; give the parks and recreation people a heads-up about visits. (However, on one occasion this brought a noisy leaf blower and an unwanted tidying-up.)
- Other events: Frisbee golf demo. "We had about 75 kids out there." An auto-parts place donated Frisbees. "Any outdoor play is outdoor play," Chip said.

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### **Insights and ideas discussion**

Richard Louv, C&NN chairman, opened the discussion session with this question: "We talk about encouraging families to do it now, do it yourself. How best to approach this? Shall we do how-to videos, or something like that, on the Web site?"

Mark started a Big Idea list on a message board by writing, "Create a kick-ass toolkit." He then suggested a small group of people follow up soon to talk about content and determine how best to disseminate the toolkit.

Participants began to pull from their own experiences as they suggested ideas and specific actions for getting families outdoors, including:

**Carmen Field, Alaska Department of Fish & Game:** Suggestion – Workshops.

Big idea: Offer a workshop to inspire parents or caregivers to get excited about organizing clubs on their own.

"We offer a free workshop for parents and children; the first 20 parents get a kit, bug jar, Rich's book and, in our PowerPoint, we tell them where they can play – which beaches are best for being out of the wind. Have done this twice."

Concrete step: Put together a kit. This would also help top management see the connection between people fishing and hunting and getting kids outside.

**Cathy Jordan, University of Minnesota:** Suggestion – Transportation.

Big idea: Tackle the transportation issue so families without cars can participate.

"If there is negative feedback [for programs such as this] it is because people have the perception this is something for overscheduled middle-class people."

Concrete step: Car-repair shops or auto dealerships may have loaner vehicles available for low cost or donation for weekend outings, or possibly try community groups that own vehicles.

**Betsy Townsend, Leave No Child Inside-Greater Cincinnati:** Suggestion – Community-action toolkit.

Big idea: Distribute this toolkit to YMCAs, schools, parks, nature centers, health organizations, government bodies. "They would grab this."

Concrete step: Get it to them. It would automatically go out; it's an instant distribution system.

**Cliff Knapp, Professor Emeritus, Northern Illinois University:** Suggestion – Libraries.

Big idea: Partner with community libraries.

"Volunteer to read books that serve as springboards for specific nature activities.

Libraries have these books sitting on the shelf; if you were to volunteer, you could read a

book like 'Everybody Needs a Rock,' by Byrd Baylor, and then everybody could go outside and collect them."

Concrete step: Encourage volunteers to read two or three books on nature to children on a Saturday morning. Availability of books: Chip Donahue suggested there are opportunities for discount books from author or publisher, if a group has nonprofit status. Cliff has an extensive bibliography of appropriate titles.

**Kellie Tharp, Arizona Game and Fish Department:** Suggestion – Partnerships and scholarship funds.

Big idea: Find programs with vans and buses that may be willing to partner for transportation.

Concrete step: Join in partnership to use vans during downtime from city parks and recreation, the YMCA. "I've been looking for a scholarship fund for a transportation grant, but this could also apply to family nature clubs." Some established groups might be willing to car pool. "If we don't address the transportation issue, we're not going to get inner-city families." Richard Louv suggested that public bus stops are sometimes right in front of parks and often overlooked.

**McKenzie Barry, Lower Platte South NRD:** Suggestion – Family nature nights.

Big idea: Seek out families, host family nature nights at schools with nature clubs; have "make and take" stations.

Concrete step: Try to partner with PTA or others to start nature clubs. Make the get-togethers free, bring pizzas. Remember, some neighborhoods have no green space. You have to go to them. "We partner with a school of 250 kids and we'll have 200 families. We did six of these events and had 1,200 people turn out. We go out once a week, to get the parents involved."

Follow-up idea: In Minnesota, library patrons can check out a museum pass; why not offer state park permits?

**Lori Kiesser, Orange County Department of Education:** Suggestion – Community-organization outreach.

Big idea: Reach out to community organizations that already have families as an audience to serve as facilitator.

Concrete step: Seek out boys and girls clubs, literacy programs and others. They can organize clubs for the families and also coordinate transportation. "In Orange County, there is a huge absent demographic because they don't have transportation."

**Avery Cleary, Hooked on Nature:** Suggestion – Intergenerational forms.

Big idea: "What if we created a form for intergenerational sharing about experiences in nature?"

Concrete step: Individuals could share for an hour afterward. "I would want to work with anyone to create the form."

**Mary Hardcastle, Hooked on Nature:** Suggestion – After-school programs; outreach at festivals through a natural playground.

Big idea: Reach out to after-school programs to help them set up nature clubs. And reach out to businesses. "We just received an REI local-store grant of \$5,000 to do three teen nature circles for inner-city kids."

Also, "we have tons of festivals, especially in the fall. We're constantly asked to do a table presentation. Instead, we've been creating a small natural playground. I have photos. So simple and very little money. We use logs and so on that park and recreation

collect for us and you can put the whole thing in a small pickup truck.” Parents could do that in their own back yard.

Concrete step: Local outreach. Make a portable playground of natural materials you can put in a pickup. People see and say: I can do that. “And these are city people.”

**Matt Gay, National Conservation Training Center:** Suggestion – National-level training for parents.

Big idea: How can we work more directly with parents?

Concrete step: “What if we put together a national-level curriculum for a training program for parents?” For example, this curriculum could be taught by park rangers to teach parents what they can do with their kids at a National Wildlife Refuge, National Park, etc.

**Hayden Brooks, Westcave Preserve and Children in Nature Communities – Austin,** has gotten a grant to create a Nearest Nature Internet site for the Austin area.

Discussion yields:

Big idea: A blog spot or podcast.

Concrete step: Go out, then share photos, writing, poetry, video – to spawn interest. Kids say, “Hey, I’m published.” A family could print out information from a PDF, or a podcast – a “give them a trip” approach with directions, etc. Another option, get out in nature and plug in. This could be like geocaching, but the treasure is the tracks described and seen. Also, a green map could be created around any topic, including nearest nature. Carmen Field suggested starting a digital-camera club for kids.

**Ashley Donahue:** Maybe local TV stations could get cameras in kids’ hands and let the kids advertise for kids. “If the child sees it, the kid will bug their parents. Our goal to use media was to attract the parents; wouldn’t it be great if we put video cameras in the hands of kids and talked to our local TV stations to put that on the screen after Pokemon or something? This is how we could reach the children ... they’d say, ‘I need to go out with this club to see that park.’”

**Betsy Townsend:** Suggestion – Nature as birthright.

Big idea: “If we could agree about birthright, then we should agree it should be a priority to provide nearby nature in urban and other areas.”

Concrete step: This could be a policy statement. From federal, state, local sources.

“With the power of this organization, we can think about making a set of recommendations. If we could agree on priorities ... if we agree this is the birthright ... it should be a priority on national, state and local levels to provide nearby nature in local areas.

#### **Discussion points in summation:**

- Form a toolkit/working group.
- Organize training for parents.
- Create a model, a template for intergenerational sharing
- Solve the transportation issue. (Car dealerships, community organizations, public bus routes, etc.)
- Find ways to involve children without family support, including after-school nature clubs.
- Counter fear aspect, in part, through outreach-training of teachers.
- Use technology, including podcasts, GIS systems, digital cameras.
- Explore the policy front, with nature as a birthright one focus.

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## Nature Clubs for Families Follow-up Session

**Chip Donahue:** “I was the first generation to say I’m going to go home and play on video games.” He learned early in his family nature club outings not to overschedule. More than 200 families receive their newsletter; many go to grandparents. Fifty to 75 people come out on a typical nature-club day. “Our outcome, what we’re looking for, is. ‘Did everyone get home OK, and did they have a good time?’ ”

**Barry Garst, American Camp Association:** Barry offered background on his organization and membership, and suggestions for how to use the Find a Camp feature on the ACA Web site, as well as other features to help make first-time camp experiences more enjoyable for youngsters (and parents). “We create standards in the industry.”

**Discussion topic:** Setting up a family nature club.

Community contact suggestions:

- PTAs
- Newsletters
- Blogs
- Insert in a park guide
- Mom’s clubs
- Put a note in a local paper/community calendar
- Notices on local-access TV
- Family fliers to schoolchildren’s families (e-mail for permission from local school districts).
- Engagement of parents with nature centers; support involved families.
- A families-club kit (as available in Nebraska. This had specific use in Lincoln’s schools; would this program adapt to communities?). Include a CD and text that describes activities, with visual examples.
- Join with an established group, such as 4-H. Advantages: Learn quickly how to equip and structure for a club. Could this be a useful structural component? Downside: They may require training and impose standards.

**Additional points for leaders to consider:**

- Freedom versus curriculum; accept the creative tension between structure and free play in planning family outings.
- Recognize that publicity is vital for individual donors.
- For those working for fee-based entities, such as a nature center: Consider offering a free family nature program as a gateway experience to later fee-based programs. Perhaps give coupons for discounts.
- Take resources where you can, from 4-H Clubs and other organizations, but acknowledge publicly.
- Develop a relationship with parks people and learn their rules. For example, some parks have 150-person limits.
- Upcoming resource: ecoAmerica plans to offer a Zip code map on its Web site showing any type of nature area.
- Toolkit: This could go in libraries. The Arbor Day Foundation could serve as a model.
- Camping: For many youngsters, this can be a deep nature experience. Approach this stepwise; back yard, longer hikes, then work up to the camping experience.
- The reappearance of children on hiking trails would be a measurable result.

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