



# Children & Nature Network

Building a Movement to Reconnect Children and Nature

## Framing the Issue: What Parents Need

1. Success will be limited if nature experience for their kids is suggested as one more *should* for parents. An alternative approach is to say that nature is, in fact, an antidote to the stress that parents feel. They, like their children, will come home feeling better after spending time in the natural world.

2. All the benefits that come to a child—the stress reduction, heightened senses, possibly longer attention span, better ability to pay attention, weight reduction—come to the parent or other positive adult who takes that child into nature. So this is not a bitter pill.

3. Prior experience not required; enthusiasm is a must. As Rachel Carson advised, "It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world." In fact, a parent who did not have much experience with nature when he or she was young may be better primed to experience nature with a child. Simultaneously, they'll feel that sense of wonder. For a parent who missed out on nature as a child, we can say, "Now's your chance."

4. In terms of parent-child attachment, what better way to bond—to strengthen attachment and to disengage from distracting electronics, advertising, and peer pressure—than to go for a walk in the woods together? Or fishing. Or any number of outdoor activities.



5. Grandparents (as well as aunts and uncles) can be a great resource to parents. Boomers are becoming grandparents. They share a generational memory of what it was like when going into nature was not only normal for children, but expected. Boomers, a cause-oriented generation, can be challenged to play a vital role in the children and nature movement, and with their own grandchildren.

6. However inaccurate our feelings of fear about stranger danger may be, the societal fear is not going to go away—not because of any increase in child abductions, but because of media conditioning. Therefore, parents will need safety reassurance from the institutions and organizations that help parents, grandparents and other guardians give children the gift of nature.

7. Successful programs tend to pay as much attention to the parents as to children, particularly the young adults who are increasingly unlikely to have had much experience in nature when they were young.



## Ten Things a Parent (Grandparent, Aunt, Uncle, or Other Guardian) Can Do

Parents can't resolve society's nature-deficit disorder by themselves. Urban designers, health care professionals, educators, policy makers—all must lend a hand. But parents and other guardians can be the first responders.

1. Begin incrementally. Encourage your child to get to know a ten-square-yard area at the edge of a field, pond, or pesticide-free garden. Look for the edges between habitats: where the trees stop and a field begins, where rocks and earth meet water. Life is always at the edges.
2. Don't feel you have to know the name of every creature, large or small; truly, all you need is your own sense of wonder. As Rachel Carson advised, "It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world."
3. Together, sit at the edge of a summer pond. Don't move; wait, wait some more—and watch frogs reappear one at a time. Use all of your senses. Wander with your child through an overgrown garden, a woods, a field.
4. Together, keep a journal. Encourage your son or daughter to describe, in words and pictures, how a bumblebee staggers across autumn leaves. Ask each other: What was happening in this same spot in June? Did that bumblebee, a bee-lifetime ago, bend flowers as it gathered pollen?
5. Encourage your child to plant a garden, picking seeds that mature quickly—including vegetables—and are large enough for a child to easily handle. Better yet, plant seeds of indigenous pollinating plants that provide nectar, roosting and nesting sites. This activity can strengthen interrupted migration corridors for birds and butterflies; your child then becomes a participant in the winged migration—not just an observer. If you live in an inner-city neighborhood: Grow a roof or window box garden.



6. Take your child on a hike, or fishing or birding or hunting with a camera. In a single week, your boy or girl can take hundreds of digital photos of beetles, worms and small feet.
7. Create a Play Watch group in your neighborhood. Ask parents to sit on front stoops or porches several hours a week, available at a distance as the children play. Such parent groups can take children on trips to local or regional parks.
8. When it's time, let your children go outside on their own. As children grow, they can flex their sense of independence from parents through backpacking, hiking and other outdoor activities. But because of parental fear of strangers (however exaggerated it may be) and the seductiveness of video games, computers and iPods, parents of small children must be *intentional* about taking their kids outdoors, and feel safe doing it.
9. Join or create a "nature gym." In the United Kingdom, families are banding together for regular exercise in nature. Researchers in England and Sweden have found that exercise (such as jogging or gardening) in a natural green setting leaves people feeling more restored, and less anxious, angry, and depressed, compared to burning the same amount of calories in gyms or other built settings.
10. Reduce your own stress through nature. Remember, when we take our children into nature, we receive the very same benefits: stress reduction, greater physical health, a sense of wonder, and shared experience. What better way to strengthen the parent-child attachment than to escape the bonds of electronics, advertising, and peer pressure by taking a walk in the woods? These gifts of nature will last a lifetime, long after the video games have disappeared.



*From Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv (Algonquin Books).*

*Children & Nature Network (www.cnaturenet.org)*



## Facing Our Fears

Parental fear of strangers is one of the most troubling barriers preventing children from experiencing nature. How real are the reasons for this fear? For the agencies that track abduction trends, there is always a delay in reporting study findings, and caution is advised in interpretation, but public fear of stranger abductions does seem to outdistance the risk. One abduction or violent crime against children is too many; clearly, stranger danger does exist. But such risk must be weighed against the health risks of overweight and other factors associated with a sedentary childhood.

- Child abductions by strangers are, in fact, rare. By a wide margin family members, not strangers, are the most common abductors. Nationwide, between 200 and 300 children were abducted by strangers in 1988, compared with 115 children in 1999, according to the National Incidence Study on Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America, released in 2002.
- According to the 2002 report, “The possibility that stereotypical kidnappings have declined is supported by declining rates of juvenile-victim homicides and of sexual and aggravated assaults in the 1990s. Such crimes include instances of and provide the context for many kidnappings by strangers. However, the current data, given their limitations, cannot be used to confirm this possibility.” The Department of Justice did report that the results of one major study did not “indicate an increase in abductions by strangers.”
- Two years later, in 2004, the Department of Justice reported “some encouraging news.” In three categories (family abductions, runaways, and lost, injured, or otherwise missing children), the analysis found: “No evidence of any increase in the incidence of missing children between 1988 and 1999. Decreases in the incidence rates for some types of episodes of missing children between 1988 and 1999.”
- In 2005, the Department reported: “Children missing from their caretakers in circumstances with benign explanations constituted 43 percent of all missing children reported to authorities—the second largest category after those classified as runaway/thrownaway.

*“The most disturbing finding” of the 2007 Child and Well-Being Index is not violence or abductions, but the fact “that children’s health has sunk to its lowest point in the 30-year history of the Index, driven largely by an alarming rise in the number of children who are obese and a smaller decline in child mortality rates than achieved in recent years.”*

- By 2005, the rates of violent crimes against young people had fallen to well below 1975 levels, according to the 2007 Duke University Child and Well-Being Index. The authors of the report state: “The most disturbing finding” of the Index is not violence or abductions, but “that children's health has sunk to its lowest point in the 30-year history of the Index, driven largely by an alarming rise in the number of children who are obese and a smaller decline in child mortality rates than achieved in recent years.”
- In 2006, New York State’s Division of Criminal Justice Services report on missing children described a microcosm of the issue: “Abduction cases accounted for approximately one percent of the total reports, and abductions committed by family members comprised the most frequent form of abduction.” One stranger abduction is too many, but in New York state, only three children were abducted by a stranger in 2006. The authors of the New York report cautioned that this may be an undercount, because of how cases are reported. Even so, the recorded number is far lower than most people believe.

### **Taking Action**

This must be said: statistics do not tell the whole story. Some neighborhoods *are* truly dangerous, particularly in inner cities. Also, while our generalized feelings of fear about stranger danger may be exaggerated by constant media coverage of a relatively few crimes, our fear is not going to go away. Therefore, parents will need safety reassurance from the institutions and organizations that help parents, grandparents and other guardians give children the gift of nature. And society will need to offer these institutions and institutions more support.



### *General suggestions for parents and other guardians*

- Go with your child into nature more often. Your experience of nature with your child sends the message that you value it and value your child; your presence assures relative safety.
- Spend more time with your children; educate them about the human dangers, but in the context of building self-confidence, sensory awareness, and knowledge of the many people they can trust.
- Seek organizations and institutions that will help your child experience nature in a relatively safe environment.
- Teach your child to watch for behaviors, not necessarily strangers. “Not only do the statistics fail to justify current levels of parental concern over child abduction, but some of the things parents do to prevent abduction actually are not that

helpful,” says noted family psychologist John Rosemond. “For example, telling a child to stay away from strangers is relatively ineffective. ‘Stranger’ is not a concept young children understand easily. Furthermore, as many — if not more — child abductions are perpetrated by friends, neighbors and acquaintances as by strangers. Instead, children ought to be taught to be on the lookout for specific threatening behaviors and situations.”

- Know your neighbors: reinvest in the life of the block and the surrounding community; encourage children to know trustworthy adults in their neighborhoods. Create a Play Watch group in your neighborhood — ask fellow parents to sit on front stoops or porches several hours a week, available at a distance as the children play. Such parent groups can take children on trips to local or regional parks.
- Beyond your visual contact, encourage your child to play with a group of peers rather than alone. (Unfortunately, solitary experience in nature must sometimes be discouraged, if the alternative is to be no nature at all.)
- Employ technology. Some experts contend that tracking-bracelets may be overdoing it, but a cell phone can be a life preserver. Just as children once carried Swiss army knives into the woods, today they should carry a mobile phone. This may be one of the paradoxes we must accept, if our children are to spend more time in nature.
- Encourage more time outdoors, in nature. Natural play strengthens children’s self-confidence and arouses their senses — their awareness of the world and all that moves in it, seen and unseen.

*The Department of Justice offers these additional suggestions:*

- Children should be on the lookout for situations or actions that make them feel uncomfortable, rather than certain kinds of people. ("Stay away from strangers" is a popular warning used to prevent child abduction and exploitation, however, many children are harmed by "acquaintances.")
- If someone tries to take you somewhere, quickly get away from them and yell "Someone is trying to take me away!" Say "No," then go and tell.
- If someone follows you on foot or in a car, run to a "safe place." A safe place is where there are other people around ... the home of a neighbor or friend or a store; not a wooded area or unoccupied building.
- Parents should always carry pictures of their children (taken within the last 6 months) and should take time every day to make a mental note regarding the clothing being worn by their children.

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