

PARENT TO PARENT

Plant your kids outside and watch 'em grow

By Heidi Stevens

Tribune staff reporter

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Ask Melinda Pruett-Jones about the need to get our kids outside more, and she uses words such as "essential," "so important" and "absolutely critical to the human race, really."

Really?

Pruett-Jones, executive director of Chicago Wilderness, certainly makes a compelling argument. And her organization has just launched the "Leave No Child Inside" program to convince you as well. The program aims to connect children with the outdoors and teach them to love and protect nature.

"This is the most important thing Chicago Wilderness has ever done," Pruett-Jones said. "Probably the most important thing Chicago Wilderness will ever do."

Richard Louv wrote about the effects of nature -- or lack thereof -- on kids' lives in his 2005 book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder" (A book that revolutionized the way I view my daughter's free time). Louv argues that we're raising a generation of children with no connection to the Earth they inhabit -- no idea where their food comes from, no desire to climb a tree, no ability to lose an afternoon searching for frogs in a creek. This "nature deficit disorder," Louv contends, can be linked to attention deficit disorder, depression and other health problems.

"Leave No Child Inside" offers a cure. The 206 organizations in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana and Michigan that make up Chicago Wilderness are putting together year-round nature events such as camping trips, hikes and restoration activities. They're also compiling a Chicago Wilderness Field Book that will suggest local natural areas for families to visit.

"The more time kids spend outside and the more questions they ask, their relationship to nature goes beyond only going there on

special occasions and under duress," Pruett-Jones said. "It becomes a place they like to be."

So where do you, as a parent, start? What if you don't live near a forest preserve? What if your neighborhood isn't safe for kids to play outside for hours on end?

Go to kidsoutside.info, the "Leave No Child Inside" Web site, where you'll find a category called "What Can You Do?" Click there for a list of upcoming Chicago Wilderness events as well as suggested family activities, such as raising monarch butterflies and bird watching. There's something for everyone: city kids, suburb kids, young kids, teenage kids.

Or maybe you view the program as inspiration to visit some of the Chicago area's treasures that you keep meaning to get to: Morton Arboretum, Chicago Botanic Garden, Garfield Park Conservatory, Busse Woods. The important thing, Pruett-Jones said, is just to get outside.

"My boys are 15 and 11 and they've had so much exposure to nature, from a variety of experiences," Pruett-Jones said, "but that indoor culture is still there. My 11-year-old loves to compose hip-hop on the computer. But when I take them outside and unplug them, they're able to let go, decompress, have fun. It's so important for them."

"In nature," Louv writes, "a child finds freedom, fantasy and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace."

It's tough to find that on television.

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