

# Book Review: Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education - A Research Summary

*Reviewed by Elise Houghton*

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If you care about healthy children, this is a must-read report.

*Information alone can never become knowledge, and knowledge never becomes wisdom without some kind of rooting in the good soil of experience.*

James Raffan, quoted in "Reconnecting Children"

Author Richard Louv did the thing that coining a marvelously succinct new phrase can do when he invented the term *nature deficit disorder*. With those three words he made his American and Canadian readerships realize that contact with nature is something that people – and specifically children – need. That human beings are a part – not just interested observers – of the natural world. And that having no contact with nature is a real deficit in one's life.

Jolted into a new concern for the health risks – physical, psychological and emotional – that being predominantly "indoor children" can pose, Americans responded to Louv's nature deficit disorder idea with the rallying cry, "No child left inside." (See [www.kidsoutside.org](http://www.kidsoutside.org)) Getting kids outdoors suddenly became a national project. Louv himself established the Children and Nature Network ([www.cnaturenet.org](http://www.cnaturenet.org)) to help build a movement that would reconnect children with the outdoors. It's a real comment on the kind of society we've created when we need a movement to get children to go outdoors.

Here in Ontario, outdoor education has been losing funding and centres. This erosion in a once well-funded field has led outdoor educators to re-think their position and respond in some creative new ways. One of these responses was the compiling of an invaluable research summary that makes the case (since there is now clearly a need for making a case) for ensuring the current and future generations of kids are given time outdoors.

The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) has produced a visually forceful, and intellectually and emotionally compelling document that summarizes the best research on the benefits to children of outdoor and experiential education (OEE). Authored by Andrea Foster and COEO past president Grant Linney, "Reconnecting Children Through

Outdoor Education" reminds us that children thrive in outdoor settings. The converse of this once-simple truth, is that deprived of time outdoors, they are subject to obesity, increased levels of ADD/ADHD, and other serious health risks.

The report asks a profound question: "Could it be that, through losing their connectedness with the outdoors, children are becoming disconnected with themselves as well as suffering severe health consequences?"

Disconnection from nature, disconnection from others through increased use of indoor enticements such as video games and television, disconnection from self given a lack of free outdoor time to explore, to ponder, to stare at the sky, observe life, bugs, clouds, hide under piles of leaves, contemplate the grandeur of the world. Busy parents, often wistfully watching their own children miss out on the simple happy times they remember "going outside to play," nonetheless feel safer driving children everywhere, and using electronics as both teaching devices and Play Stations. Some see actual competition between time spent gaining computer competence (a marketable work skill) and idle time spent in an unsupervised and possibly unsafe outdoor environment. Both increased (and often unfounded) fears of "stranger danger," and growing worries about liability have resulted in what Richard Louv has termed "the criminalization of natural play."

The solutions? We need, "Reconnecting Children" tells us, to become "nature mentors." We need to find many different ways to give nature back to all of our children. Parents, teachers, community leaders, outdoor educators can all be part of this effort to make outdoor opportunities available, fun, educational, inspiring – and re-connecting, for all children.

Whatever connection you may have to children and the outdoors, there is something in this report for you. It covers an impressively comprehensive range of approaches to outdoor experiences. It begins, as one might expect outdoor educators to do, with curriculum and community, place-based learning, and the many benefits of formalized outdoor education in established centres. But from there, it moves to a fascinating and informative description of the

many additional benefits of outdoor learning that may be less top-of-mind, and so serve as eloquent calls for renewed effort in connecting children with nature. Education for wellbeing, education for character, and education for the environment are the headers under which unfurls a marvellous array of outdoor experience's contributions to adventure, physical challenge, independence, confidence, self-assertiveness, emotional and spiritual and emotional well-being, and character-building.

Interpersonal growth is another positive outcome of shared time outdoors, fostering caring, cooperative, action-oriented and informed young people.

Perhaps one of the most compelling attributes of outdoor education to environmental educators is its unique capacity to instil a love of and connection to nature in young people, giving them a kinship with the natural world that will help them become environmental stewards in the future. In addition to outdoor centres and wilderness, outdoor learning today has expanded to new settings, in cities, in parks, and in one-paved school grounds. Nature is everywhere, outdoor educators are telling us, and today's young people must learn to better love, understand and want to protect it, everywhere. They will only have this chance if we make sure that they do.

Ask a child to name ten birds. Then ask him or her to name ten trees. Then ask which ten logos come to mind first.

Then ask, "What are we teaching our children?"

And read "Reconnecting Children."

And take a child out into nature.

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*Elise Houghton is an Environmental Education Consultant/Writer and board member of Environmental Education Ontario. This review was published in the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario Newsletter and is reprinted with permission.*