

# The Green Child



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To hear the medical profession tell it, the glitches we experience in daily life reflect pathology, medical problems within each of us. But do people exist principally in isolation, or do we live largely in relationship to other humans and our environment? Even if we were all islands, how could we ever make sense of anything (person or object) without considering its context? As the art critic John Berger once wrote, we can only see any one thing in relation to something else.

In *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005), Richard Louv observes that people need nature, that children are being cut off from it, and that the resulting alienation is disastrous both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Scientific, medical, and historical sources, including published research and interviews, help Louv show that people have an innate affinity for nature and respond positively to it. When we absorb ourselves in the technological world to the exclusion of all else, we forfeit precious opportunities for physical and emotional exercise. We lose a sense of proportion. In the process we grow fat and increase our vulnerability to mental and physical stress.

Louv writes, “Although countless children who suffer from mental illness and attention disorders do benefit from medication, the use of nature as an alternative, additional, or preventive therapy is being overlooked. In fact, new evidence suggests that the need for such medications is intensified by children’s disconnection from nature” (p. 48). Some studies show that children are better able to focus and pay attention when they spend more time outside. Could

attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) be a set of symptoms aggravated by deprivation? Woe unto the pharmaceutical industry if so.

With or without drugs, nature heals humans. Just consider a few of Louv's many points in this book:

- Teenagers are able to focus and calm down after viewing natural images, for example, when they study or play in rooms with a view of nature.
- Children work through problems by playing outdoors, interpreting natural sights and sounds in ways that reflect their inner experience (one child may see a mound of earth as a pregnant belly, for instance, another, as a grave).
- A piece of landscape—preferably messy and ungroomed—affords children almost unlimited learning opportunities and ways of expressing themselves. The exercise of building a simple tree house teaches many practical skills.
- Nature lets people escape from troubling issues without leaving the real world; outdoor education programs have amply demonstrated their therapeutic value for youth.

When we stop experiencing the environment directly, we feel less personally involved in the world. The boob tube, the Game Boy, the iPod, and their cousins isolate us in a virtual prison cell. Portable technology lets us manipulate our immediate surroundings while preventing us from seeing how we fit in.

Nature soothes us. It also nurtures our innate inventiveness and creativity. It instills a dynamic awareness of our relationship with place and with our senses. It gives us ecstatic moments and reminds us that human beings are not the center of the universe but, as living organisms, only part of its fabric. If people need nature and need to remember that we are part of it, why have we distanced ourselves from it?

Perhaps we suffer from a fear of danger fed by a lack of knowledge. For example, when we recognize and name common plants and animals found in the wild, we have a way of knowing them. Today's children often do not have such knowledge. And yet stewardship of the earth can hardly be entrusted to a generation of citizens with no information about it.

As parents and members of the community, we adults shoulder much of the responsibility for educating children. Kids need unstructured time in nature. We must give them chances to develop confidence in their own instincts and equip them to assess and manage risks. Families can go hiking, camping, and fishing. Schools can provide children with hands-on, intimate contact with the earth and living things. Teachers can take students outside, engage them in gardening,

invite them to explore and discover. Schools can also open their doors to local, national, and international efforts to broaden children's awareness.

Children who appreciate nature will live in the world differently, Louv suggests. Once people understand animals more fully—their thought processes and habits—we will notice not only their astonishing complexity but also their similarity to humans. As we become more aware of our dependence on nature for our mental health, we will become more open to the need for peaceful coexistence with other forms of life. As long as we try to subdue the earth, we prepare for our own destruction. When we live in harmony with other beings, we awaken physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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