

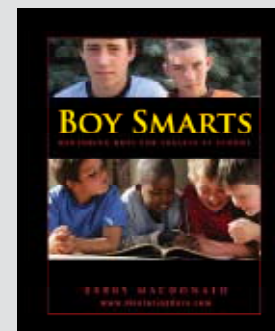


Nature... ARE BOYS SPENDING ENOUGH TIME OUTDOORS?

Hello Barry,

When the weather is good, my 7-year-old son wants to play outside, but there is no one on our street for him to play with. During the school year our local elementary school is bursting at the seams with kids, but now they are nowhere to be found. Why aren't more parents getting their kids outside more? Are they afraid the kids will get abducted or injured? Do the kids prefer to stay inside and watch video games and television? While getting my haircut yesterday, I overheard a woman talking about her plans to buy \$5000 TV for her youngest boy this summer because Pokémon is no good if it's not in HD. Why aren't parents using any extra cash to buy bikes or camping gear? Is this typical? How can we get our boys outside more?

*Sylvia
Richmond Hill, Ontario*



Is nature viewed as uncontrollable, off-limited wildness?

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Dear Sylvia,

Today, I find myself walking on a sunny day in mid-June, walking along a beach trail in British Columbia. The southerly wind keeps the late spring heat at bay and in the distance I notice a kite with a long red tail darting and dancing in the sky. I remember the joy I got from designing, constructing, and flying kites as a boy. As I move closer toward the dancing kite, I soon discover that that the ones at play are adults, not kids. Looking further down the beach, I begin to wonder why I'm not seeing more children.

Could they be at their local parks playing "Capture the Flag," swinging from monkey bars or shooting hoops? Cycling or skating around their neighbourhoods? Testing their entrepreneurial skills with a lemonade stand?

Could they, on this delightful spring day, possibly be inside, glued to a television or electronic screen?

Although I believe that video games and digital entertainment have their uses, I can't help but wonder how kids will refresh and renew this summer without plentiful access to nature and green outdoor spaces.

Of course, it's easy to wax nostalgic about the role nature played in our free-range childhood—the endless hours of unstructured play—digging in the dirt or building forts in backyards; practicing new bicycle tricks on our neighbourhood streets; observing plant life, birds, insects, or animals in community parks.

Unless you were allergy prone, it is likely that your summers afforded free-style adventure play at its best, with no admission charges, restricted hours of operation, or overly constraining rules of engagement.

I suspect that our own parents wanted us to be safe, but I don't recall my mother scheduling play dates or driving me around the corner to a friend's house. I also doubt that she was worried about stranger danger and other hazards while I gallivanted across our neighbourhood in search of adventure, friends, and fun.

Ironically, despite many studies demonstrating that violence is actually decreasing in our communities, our fears of risk and danger for our kids have



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Contact outside promotes health...

have intensified. And the more our kids shy away from spending time in nature, the more they begin to view it as uncontrollable and off-limited wildness, something to be protected from rather than connected with.

It's also sad that educational leaders—perhaps out of fear of litigation—do not challenge our culture's risk aversion in the way that David Bell, OFSTED's chief inspector of schools (The Office for Standards in Education in Britain), does. He argues that risk is part of life, and that children need to learn about risk in modulated ways: "One of the best ways to help children to learn about risk is to teach them how to deal with difficult and tricky situations by allowing them to experience them in controlled conditions." After all, how can kids, who are part of nature themselves, come to be fully alive if they are not allowed to engage in complexities and challenges outdoors?

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, argues that society is giving kids an unintended message that nature is in the past, that the bogeyman lives in the woods, and that the future is in electronics. He also draws from scientific evidence showing that direct contact with the outdoors promotes healthy physical, cognitive, and emotional, child development.

In the United States, the House of Representatives last year overwhelmingly approved a "*No Child Left Inside Act*" that will promote environmental literacy in the schools. Similarly, the BBC reported this past spring on a Scottish government initiative to boost the amount of time that pre-school children spend outdoors, and a push for educators to restore more risk and adventure to their classrooms.

While we need to balance risk and safety considerations along with the integration of electronic media into a boy's world, we also need to find ways to get our Canadian kids outside more where they can experience the wonders of our natural world beyond a screen—especially in the summer.



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The Benefits of Being Outside

Many studies have found that exposure to nature helps promote active and engaged learning for children. Childhood play in nature reduces stress, encourages creative social play, reduces symptoms of attention deficit disorder, and provides a foundation for environmental awareness and responsibility that carries over into adult life. Studies have also demonstrated that childhood play in more natural, diversified settings, with uneven ground, trees and shrubs rather than in smooth, built environments

Even the mere presence of a tree improves self-discipline, behaviour...

also sparks more imaginative and varied play. And of course, with all the talk now of childhood obesity, childhood outdoor play is a fun way for children to keep in shape. OFSTED has found that outdoor activity “contributes to personal growth and social awareness” and “to health and fitness and continuing participation in outdoor pursuits” throughout life. Significantly, it also “introduces young people to the environment in a way which develops understanding appreciation, awe, wonder and respect... [and] the need for sustainable use of the world’s natural resources.”

Social psychologist Francis Kuo, in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, highlights how any exposure to nature in childrens’ emotional and intellectual development, indicating that even the mere “presence of a tree outside the window of a child living in the ghetto improves self-discipline, behavior, and academic achievement.” Indeed, the healing effects of nature extend to us all. Eric Weiner, in *The Geography of Bliss*, reports that patients recovering from gallbladder surgery with a natural window view recuperated much faster than those whose rooms overlooked a brick wall.

Nature refreshes the life of the spirit. As Thoreau once said, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

In the hopes that you and your family will reap some of the many benefits of being in nature, I offer the following suggestions.

Discover next-door nature:

Sometimes we are blind to the nature we live next door to because we expect nature to be so much wilder and grander—perhaps a place that we travel to on summer vacation or a national park—but to children, your local ravine is a universe. Perhaps you have a ravine behind your home or a little woodsy enclave at the end of the street. Nature flourishes in these small local areas. I recall a recent neighbourhood walk with a boy who noticed a fern poking its way through a paved walkway in search of survival. A little later, as we talked about new opportunities arising from his recent struggles at school, the boy noticed new growth arising from the dead limb of a tree. Without words, nature teaches about nature’s cycles and processes, about letting go and regeneration.

Build walking into your routines:

Taking the time to walk slowly, to notice and reflect on what you see around you—trees, plants, animals, rock formations and wildflowers—can be very restorative. Let yourself sense the light summer wind, and the warmth of the sunlight as it filters through a canopy of treetops. Take the



“In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

Consider visiting
www.naturebag.com

Naturebag is a thoughtfully assembled and eco-friendly way to invite children to explore nature.

Highly kinesthetic boys especially benefit from outdoor play and activity...

invitation nature offers us every day—to slow down, pause, pay attention, and breathe.

When grandparents, relatives, or friends come to visit, begin the visit with a walk through your local area. Notice how this family ritual gently attunes you to nature's rhythms, and to increased awareness of your own rhythms. Walking creates the time and space to talk, or to be silent. Appreciate that for highly kinesthetic boys, walking and simple exposure to natural settings has been shown to reduce symptoms of ADHD, says the American Journal of Public Health.

Cultivate an interest in bugs:

There is nothing more interesting to a young boy than bugs, worms, or unusual looking insects. Having a natural curiosity, kids learn quickly as they observe an army of ants taking little bits and pieces to build their homes. A honeycomb or in chrysalis' struggle to become a butterfly reveals the wonder of nature. With support, kids may come to realize that the world is bigger than they are, and holds many wonders to discover and appreciate.

Go camping:

Camping in a tent and outdoor living for a time can be a great antidote for the consumerism of our society. Setting up a tent, cooking meals, and hiking a rough trail can help kids move directly into present experience while also creating lasting memories. Kids can learn about local species of trees, plants, birds, animals, about the fluctuations of weather and temperature, about gathering and splitting wood—with a sharp axe—to prepare for a campfire. They will listen to nighttime noises, and discover how it feels to sleep upon the ground. Not incidentally, these camping experiences will create a special kind of family intimacy.

Help kids learn about bicycle repair:

While the yesteryear stereotype of men endlessly tinkering in the garage is limiting in many ways, I have discovered that countless boys who run into problems with their bikes don't know how to perform basic maintenance or repairs, such as oiling or replacing a bike chain, maintaining tire pressure and changing a flat tire. With time boys will learn to overhaul their hub, as well as how to take wheels apart and clean ball bearings. If there is no bicycle enthusiast in your home to teach these basic skills, you may discover that sometimes people at local bike shops can help, or they may even offer a course. It's also likely that kids who can fix their own bikes, or



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Nature's strong regenerative ability also teaches that damage can be healed...

skateboards or skimboards, just might learn more sense of confidence and self-reliance.

Exposure to nature teaches awareness of life's interconnectedness:

Kids who have developed an appreciation for nature at an early age will also come to understand how nature seeks balance; that leaves die in the fall but renewal comes in the spring; that honey-bees may sting but without them there would be no pollination. Nature provides abundant examples of decay and destruction but also of regeneration and renewal. Exposure to the never-ending cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth in nature can put life and death into perspective and impart a sense of constancy in a changing world. Nature's strong regenerative ability also teaches that damage can be healed.

Plant a garden:

Children who are able to pick peas fresh from the garden do not have to be coaxed to eat their vegetables, and children who get involved in gardening may also develop an appreciation for healthy eating that stays with them. Most kids learn best through hands-on experiences, and digging in the damp soil—whether in your yard, a community garden, or even a small container garden on a patio or balcony—imparts sensory pleasure while also teaching about the cycles of nature, and about where food comes from. Together, you might also plant indigenous flowers to attract butterflies and hummingbirds into your yard, and later study the seeds and the plants at their different stages of maturity.



Welcome the birds:

Thoughtfully placed birdhouses will bring hours of enjoyment to your family as you observe feeding patterns throughout the day. Be sure to place a bird feeder near a window so that you can make observations from within the home. Make pinecone bird feeders with peanut butter and birdseed and hang in local trees. Kids love to watch the birds that peck the small holes as well as the ground feeders who are too big for the feeder and so gather around the bottom to munch the fallen seeds. As you continue this practice throughout the year, and the weather gets colder, your family will be drawn even closer to nature as they observe the birds' elemental quest for survival.

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Today's children will inherit the most technologically advanced society ever...

Children learn what they live:

When kids gain the ability to safely navigate their immediate outdoor surroundings, they develop confidence in the larger world and the belief that they will be eventually able to lead their own lives. Learning about the environment from an early age introduces boys to a range of experiences and perhaps even potential career opportunities they might not otherwise consider. Kids who always walk on pavement might never think of becoming a wildlife conservationist, a horticulturist, or a marine biologist unless they are introduced to untamed wilderness, taken for a walk in the woods or to the seaside. Remember too that spending time together out-of-doors is a wonderful way to strengthen bonds within families. Outdoor activities can teach children trust, teamwork, and the satisfaction of achievement—that each family member is vital to the group's overall success.

Protecting the environment:

Today's children will inherit the most technologically advanced society ever witnessed on this planet. They will communicate with each other in ways we can't yet imagine, at speeds that will boggle our minds, exchanging information that hasn't yet been discovered. Schools can provide some education about the environment, but it is a personal connection to the environment that leads to an appreciation for the importance of the ways that as we are nourished and sustained by green spaces, we must in turn sustain these spaces in our lives.

Leonardo da Vinci once said: *"Human subtlety will never devise an invention more beautiful, more simple or more direct than does nature, because in her inventions nothing is lacking and nothing is superfluous."* May you and your children take more time this summer to get outside and experience the healing powers of nature. When your kids becoming increasingly active outside, you might just find yourself doing more laundry, bandaging more knees, or even tripping over creepie crawlies brought inside for scientific examination—but your kids will be growing strong and healthy, and, with a bit of luck, happily tired for a night of restorative sleep. • • •

Barry MacDonald

MentoringBoys.com

