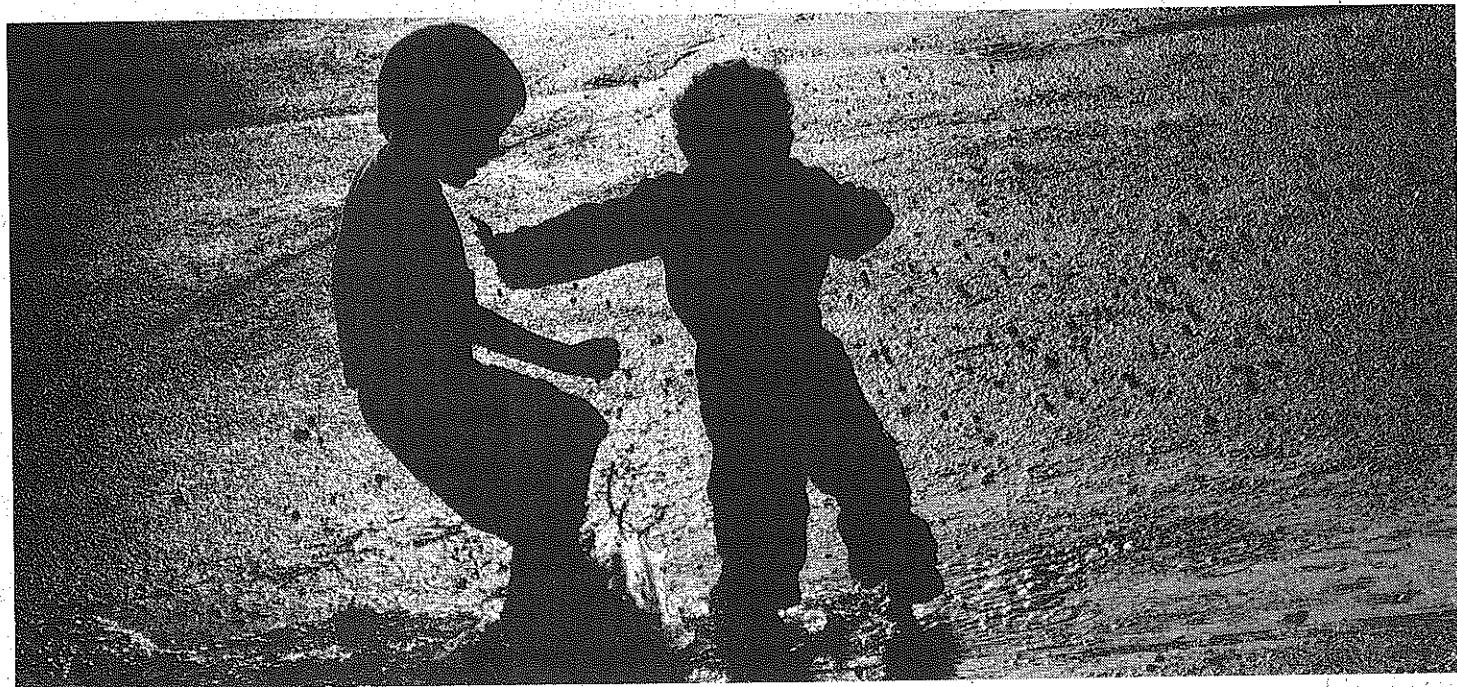


The great outdoors are just that for kids



Risks of keeping them inside - like obesity - are much higher

By LIZ SZABO
USA TODAY

Ask almost anyone over 35, in any part of the country, and they will invariably remember spending their childhoods in the same place: outside.

Every day. All day. From morning until dusk, returning home only "when the streetlights came on," recalls Ashley Donahue, 38, from Roanoke, Va.

Yet few kids today are able to experience nature that way.

In only a generation, kids have stopped spending most of their playtime outdoors. It's one of the most profound changes in the history of childhood, says pediatrician Harvey Karp, a board member of the Environmental Working Group, an advocacy group.

"It's the end of thousands of years of normal childhood," Karp says.

Of course, there's a lot less nature left these days. More people live in cities than in the countryside now, says Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder."

But the biggest barrier to getting kids outside is fear, Louv says.

ries of child abductions and molestations created the widespread myth that predators were lurking around every corner, he says. At the same time, street crime and drug-related violence led many urban parents to bring their children indoors.

In truth, 78 percent of abductions are committed by family members, not strangers, says the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And the rate of violent crime against kids ages 12 to 17 today is about 50 percent lower than in the 1970s, says the National Crime Victimization Survey.

Many parents underestimate the real risks to their children, however, from sedentary living and obesity, Louv says.

Richard Kenyon, 44, remembers spending the "whole day in the canyons, and nobody knew where you were." Kenyon still loves nature, and he brings his students as often as possible to the children's garden at San Diego's McKinley Elementary School, where he teaches second grade.

Inspired by Louv's book, more than 100 families have launched small nature clubs, in which parents and kids band together to explore the outdoors.

"If children are going to have any kind of meaningful experience in nature, they

ies," says Louv, who founded the Children & Nature Network to kick-start such efforts.

"When it's just one family, the kids stick close to the parents and whine and complain," he says. "But the minute several families get together, the kids are off on their own and playing hide-and-seek, independent of the parents."

Donahue, who started a family nature club in Virginia's Roanoke Valley three years ago, says: "There's no sibling rivalry when they go outside. They were helping each other climb trees, looking at bugs together. We very quickly realized that outside was where they were happiest."

Donahue's group now leads an average of 20 nature outings a year into the Blue Ridge Mountains, with up to 120 participants from around the region. "It really does give them the feeling of being free in nature, with no parents watching you, even though there are 25 parents around," Donahue says.

MORE ONLINE: Get experts' tips for outdoor fun with kids, and see video from San Diego's McKinley Elementary School garden at SavingChildhood.usatoday.com

Kids bored? Find fun outside in nature

GOT DIRT? A truckload of dirt can cost as little as a video game — in addition to the cost of bucket, shovel and some soap.

INVITE THE NEIGHBORS: Build a house for birds, butterflies or bats. Put out bird feeders. Plant native flowers that attract butterflies, such as asters, hollyhocks, lupine and milkweed. Hummingbirds love red flowers, and a simple sugar-water mixture in a feeder. The Audubon Society provides more ideas at audubonathome.org/yard.

LOOK UNDER A ROCK: Or, leave a wooden board in the dirt, then come back in a day or two and check out who's living there.

GO NUTS: Collect acorns and other nuts. See what's inside them. Use them to make loud musical instruments. See how the sound changes if you use a plastic bucket or tin can.

BUILD SOMETHING: A tree house, a snow fort or a backyard pond can all teach kids about basic construction and design.

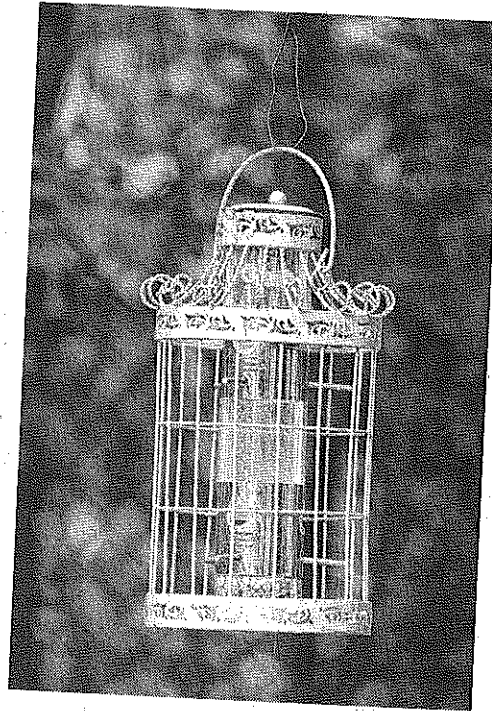
TRACK SOMETHING: Follow the path of local wildlife and try to figure out who's been visiting your yard. Snowy and muddy days are some of the best days to track.

LISTEN TO BIRDS: Beyond teaching them about nature, learning to identify bird calls helps improve children's concentration and listening skills.

COLLECT ROCKS: Find lots of different kinds. Learn which kinds of rock they are. For older kids, get a rock polishing set to make them smooth.

SPLASH IN A PUDDLE OR LOOK FOR YOUR REFLECTION IN ONE: How does your reflection change when you disturb the water? Investing in rain boots, water-proof pants and a raincoat now — for both parents and children — pays big dividends later, by letting kids blow off steam even when it won't stop pouring.

DO A MOON DANCE: Take a night-time walk with a flashlight, to see who's afoot



when the moon is out.

CREATE A TREASURE CHEST: Save the feathers, flowers and acorns that kids find on their walks in a box, so they can savor them later.

PLANT A SEED: Kids can plant flower seeds even in the winter, when it's too cold for a garden. Many stores now sell seed kits just for kids. Plant bulbs in the fall, so kids can look forwards to flowers in the spring. Let kids have a small corner of the garden, or even a couple of pots of dirt, just to dig.

LOOK FOR PATTERNS IN THE ICE: In cold weather, kids can look for patterns in frozen water where it is — on a deck chair or in a flower pot. Let kids paint the ice and see what happens to colored water when it hits the cold ice. Use a spray bottle of watercolors for abstract effects.

BUILD IGLOOS WITH ICE CUBES: Don't have any snow? Let kids use ice cubes like building blocks, building forts, houses or cities.

PLAY A GAME OF "WHAT'S BEAUTIFUL TODAY?" Even on a frozen February day, kids can learn to spot moss, mushrooms and dried, blanched wildflowers.

COUNT THE RINGS ON A TREE STUMP: When you're done, try climbing on it — or using it as a stage. Look in the crags to see who lives inside.

GET WILD INSIDE: When it's raining or bitterly cold, visit a greenhouse or botanical garden.

ORGANIZE A TREASURE HUNT: Hide small objects outside, then give kids a map or spoken instructions about how to find them.

COLLECT STICKS: Kids can use them to build log cabin, alphabet letters or a tic-tac-toe board. Use leaves instead of Xs and Os.

START A COMPOST PILE: Kids can learn about gardening and reducing the amount of trash they produce.

PLAY WITH YOUR SHADOW: Trace it with chalk. How does it change during the day?

BUILD A SUNFLOWER HOUSE: Plant sunflowers in an 8-foot square. Fill the interior with white clover. As the flowers grow, bees, birds and butterflies will flock to your garden — and the stalks will create a shady, natural playhouse for small kids.

MAKE A SOLAR S'MORE: Even without a campfire, you can cook s'mores by wrapping them in aluminum foil and leaving them in the sun for 10 minutes.

COLLECT LEAVES: At home, try to figure out which trees they came from. Make leaf tracings or a scrapbook.

Sources: "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder"; "15 Minutes Outside: 365 Ways to Get Out of the House and Connect With Your Kids."