

Let's Be Friends: The Essential Child/Nature Bond

This issue of *Green Hearts'* newsletter focuses on the critical emotional relationship between children and nature.

What was it for you? Was it a rag-tag fort you built and enjoyed with friends? Or perhaps your first little garden? A secret hiding place in the local woods where you'd play for hours? Maybe all those freezing mornings spent on a deer stand, when nature flowed around you? Or could it have been (as in a story once told to this writer) the backyard hole that you and your siblings dug — shovel-full after shovel-full, summer after summer — until it actually became the pond you were dreaming of, a pond that is still there today?!

These are the opening acts of a life-long friendship with nature. Bit by bit, childhood time spent outdoors builds a casual familiarity with nature. That familiarity can then grow into true affection — a deep, powerful affection that can forge lasting bonds between a child and the natural world. Stories of childhood play in nature are nearly ubiquitous among American baby boomers and their elders. Just try asking an adult friend about their favorite outdoor play as a child; you're likely to hear fun and nostalgic memories! Of course, none of those outdoor-playing kids ever thought that they might be starting on their way to a lifetime of caring about conservation; they were just having fun!

What can you do to help re-connect children with nature? See page 4.

However, research has found that it was much more than fun. Starting 30 years ago, numerous studies — from several countries and cultures — have searched for the key influences that turn the pliable clay of children into adults who hold and practice conservation values. No single form of experience

guarantees this result, but it turns out that certain activities are consistently most influential.



One study, by Dr. Louise Chawla (University of Colorado-Denver) compiled all available data from these research efforts and looked for commonalities. Over and over again, two types of childhood nature experiences were cited as the most common influences on adult conservation values: a strong “experience of place” during childhood, and mentors who introduced and promoted nature activities.

Those “experiences of place” were not as cerebral as that research lingo makes them sound. Generally, they were what we now call “nature play” — frequent, unstructured play in and with nature. That play could

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Of Nature and Friendship

During difficult or pensive times, many of us venture into the sanctuary of nature seeking new wisdom for our big questions of life — or perhaps to re-affirm our comfort with old answers to the same questions. Other times we're not sure of our quest; we just feel drawn to our wild and personal refuges.

An intimate experience with nature can bring us tranquility and renewed insight, at least for a time. And if the bond becomes deep enough, for a *life* time. The natural world is a place for listening to the spiritual yearnings within us — those places of the soul that we struggle to visit amidst the grocery shopping, and office deadlines, and catching up on Facebook, and squeezing in 15 minutes more on the elliptical machine.

I am blessed to have long and deep bonds to several truly wild places. Nothing replaces visiting them in person, yet my spiritual link to them is so strong that when I still my mind, I can place myself right there. Lying on the nighttime sand at Assateague Island, with a riot of stars above and ghost crabs scurrying about my feet. Watching the otters play in Vermont's Bourne Pond, as the evening light fades and then sends out a last, giddy burst of magenta. Paddling through the sleet on the Boundary Waters' Saganaga Lake, with an icy/hot feeling of being fully alive while going head-to-head with a joyful challenge.

Whether traveling afoot, afloat, or through the mind, the joy and respite of nature are always there for us, when we are open to receive them. But nature was not *put* there for us. That kind of human hubris too often leads us to exploit and harm the natural world. Thankfully, we can never kill off nature, but we do

have the dreadful power to dramatically alter its form, and even to eliminate our own species in the process. But I don't believe that is our fate. Most of us are especially careful with the welfare of our friends and loved ones, even on the rare occasions when a little hurt may be unavoidable. So if we — *humans* — can come to see nature as a friend, then we are likely to handle her with that same loving kindness.

Unfortunately, that has not been our course since the industrial revolution, and probably from the time science adopted the mechanistic, mind/body separation advanced by Descartes, Newton, and legions of their protégés. Too often we have seen nature as a beast to be tamed, or as booty awaiting our plunder, or as just a stage set for our human ventures. Not all cultures share that view, of course; some see the material and spiritual worlds as unified. But their separation has been a common mindset for ten generations now. When we finally grow beyond that — going back to the future, in a way — we will unlock an enduring and ecologically sound partnership with nature. We are progressing in that task, but clearly we have a long road yet to travel.

Ultimately, we need a re-birthing of our societal attitudes about the natural world. Nature itself provides inspiration for such renewal, with its rolling seasons of hibernation and re-emergence. Yet our own ecological awakenings must *not* be cyclical, waxing and waning with popular culture or with the short-term resolve that arises out of each new environmental crisis.

Instead, our bond with nature must mimic our best personal relationships, where our feelings for loved ones remain steady and affirming throughout our inevitable highs and lows, and despite all the utterly surprising episodes of life that sneak up on us. Truly meaningful connections with nature — just as between people — must be enduring, unshakeable, and grounded in our highest personal beliefs, integrity, and affection. They must not be fleeting infatuations that shoot off like rockets, only to come down like meteors.

Powerful and loving relationships with nature can arise anytime in life, but most often they begin during childhood — that magical period when our brains, bodies, hearts, and spirits are all developing in fluent synchronicity, like the one entity they are meant to be. So when we connect our children with nature, we are fueling deep spiritual foundations for both conservation and personal wisdom. Such intense and passionate connections remain much too rare — both among humans and between humans and nature. But once such potent bonds are activated, they last a lifetime. It is these deep personal connections that can best guide our loving friendship with nature in ways that will help all of us — young and old alike — to thrive.

Green Hearts

Institute for Nature in Childhood

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization incorporated in Nebraska.

Mission Statement

Green Hearts' mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.

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take the form of fishing, digging holes, whacking trees with sticks, raising tadpoles into frogs, building dens, climbing trees, and dozens of other activities familiar to millions of American adults. Vitally, though, they were a common occurrence, not just a once-a-year vacation trip. In Chawla's words, "The special places that stood out in memory, where people formed a first bond with the natural world, *were always part of the regular rhythm of life...*" (italics added). These activities were not scripted, they had no pre-planned schedule, and no adult coaches decided who could enjoy them and when. They were just free-form play — yet their powerful psychological impacts endured.

Those nature play experiences became even stronger when aided and abetted by mentors — most often parents who took their kids camping, or fishing, or helped them start gardens, or who just kept kicking them out the door, telling them simply to be back by dinner time. In fact, "Go out and play!" was virtually the theme for generations of American kids.

One influence that is not so strong is formal education. For forty years the environmental education field has worked on a quiet assumption that the key to strengthening societal conservation values — that is, the limiting factor in that quest — is knowledge of ecology and human impacts upon the environment. The expectation has been that a well-informed public will use that knowledge to change their environmental behaviors.



Joshua York photo

Research is finding that this is not usually the case. Instead, children must first fall in love with nature, then they *want* to learn about it and protect it. In effect, the heart comes before the head. This early love of the outdoors is exactly what nature play fosters!

There's a reason our name is Green Hearts — not Green Brains!

Environmental learning remains important, but it is best engaged when a child's personal connection to nature has been well-established. Even then, such learning will not necessarily occur in school. Today's kids have incredible amounts of information literally at their fingertips, via the internet. Thus, any child who wants to learn about ecology can readily do so. Plus, the traditional sources of nature study remain common, ranging from scouting and 4H to summer camps, libraries, and nature centers.

As a conservation organization, Green Hearts is focused on nature play as an effective strategy for increasing the public's commitment to ecological sustainability. Happily, a growing body of research is finding that frequent free play in rich outdoor settings is also a great stimulus for children's overall healthy growth and development: physically, socially, emotionally, creatively, and intellectually.

Ironically, just as we are coming to understand the powerful and positive impacts of nature play, it is vanishing from childhood. Today, American children spend only one percent of their time outdoors — versus 27% with the various forms of electronic media. On average, that means about 6.5 hours per day with television, video games, computers, and recorded music, but less than half an hour spent outside.

The challenge, now, is how to intentionally restore something that used to happen automatically: nature play. For ideas you can use, turn the page!

What is Green Hearts Up To?

One of Green Hearts' goals is to help the public and our professional colleagues to understand and apply the value and power of nature-based play. Here's a sampling of some of our recent projects.

Connecticut: Business plan for a nature preschool, Ansonia Nature and Recreation Center (Ansonia).

Indiana: Conference keynote, 4C of Southern Indiana (Evansville). *Scheduled:* Conference keynote, Community Alliance and Services for Young Children (Terre Haute).

Pennsylvania: *Restoring the Nature of Childhood*, public presentation (Erie). Nature play space design, Asbury Woods Nature Center and SafeNet Domestic Shelter (both in Erie).

Nebraska: *Parents' Workshops on Nature Play* (Omaha, Springfield). Discussion panelist, *The Secret Garden*, Filmstreams & Lauritzen Gardens (Omaha). *Upcoming:* Model nature play yard, Street of Dreams (Omaha), in collaboration with MORE Nature.

Publication: "Design Principles for Nature Play Spaces," *Directions*, the Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators (two parts, Winter and Spring, 2010). Also available on Green Hearts' website: www.greenheartsinc.org.

How Can We Bring Nature Play Back to Our Children?

Restoring nature play to childhood requires a delicate balancing act. Some degree of structured effort is needed, since nature play will not just re-appear on its own; childhood has changed too much. However, if too much structure is applied, it can negate the free-form, spontaneous activity that lies at the heart of good nature play. Wise parents, educators, and conservationists will make nature play opportunities available to kids, and will then withdraw into the background — letting the children play with as little supervision as safety can allow. Here are a few ideas for how you can make those opportunities happen.

At Home:

- ♥ Speak to your kids like your mom spoke to you: “Go out and play!” Don’t worry if they say they’re bored; boredom sparks creativity. If you feel compelled to give them play ideas, check out “What Can a Child Do in Nature? — 101 Ideas” in the Nature Play section of Green Hearts’ website: www.greenheartsinc.org.
- ♥ Set strict time limits on your kids’ electronic play — and have the courage to enforce them!
- ♥ Set an example by committing your own time to outdoor play, with your kids along. Take a hike, climb a tree, tend a garden, paddle a canoe, or just go for a walk in the rain.
- ♥ Enhance your yard for better nature play. For easy and affordable ideas, check out “A Parents’ Guide to Nature Play” at www.greenheartsinc.org.



Family Adventures:

- ♥ Have a backyard campout at least once a year.
- ♥ Take your kids outside at memorable hours that they don’t usually see: dawn, midnight, 3 a.m. They’ll probably complain at the time — but they’ll be bragging about it later.
- ♥ Go fishing. Don’t know how to fish? Then look for family fishing clinics put on by local parks departments or sporting groups, and join in.
- ♥ Go camping once per season. If tents are too rustic for your taste, rent a cabin in a state park. And be sure to give your kids plenty of time for unstructured free play outside! Leave the electronics at home; they can use the rest.
- ♥ Go on a play picnic: equal parts food and fun! For variety, try picnicking as a sunrise snack, or as midnight munching.
- ♥ Join Scouting or other youth groups that spend abundant time in nature.

We need to give them [children] time outdoors, where they can meet and savor the world that humans have not made — pill bugs on a sidewalk, a swarm of tadpoles in a puddle, a tree for climbing, a sky aflame with sunset, a kiss of wind.
-- Scott Russell Sanders

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- Schedule us for a talk or workshop.
- Visit our website: www.greenheartsinc.org
- Donate to support our work.
- Share this newsletter with a friend.
- Become our friend on Facebook.



In the Community:

- ♥ Join the scheduled nature play outings of a local family nature club. If your area doesn’t have one, start one yourself, or do it in cahoots with a friend! You can learn how from the “Nature Clubs for Families Toolkit” in the Natural Families section of the Children & Nature Network website: www.childrenandnature.org.
- ♥ Start a nature play book club. Begin with Last Child in the Woods, by Rich Louv. Then try The Thunder Tree by Robert Michael Pyle, or Reclaiming Childhood by William Crain.
- ♥ Start a movement to naturalize your local elementary school’s grounds. Speak to the PTA and the principle, and share with them the research about how valuable nature-based play is for healthy childhood development. Summaries of this research can be found at www.childrenandnature.org.
- ♥ Speak up for holistic childhoods, wherein all developmental areas are equally valued. Help friends, school administrators, politicians, and pediatricians to realize that creative, social, emotional, and physical development are just as essential to the creation of healthy, happy, and successful adults as are academic skills.
- ♥ Speak with your local community Planning Commission about the importance of including green spaces in all residential developments — and then allowing kids to play in them!
- ♥ Encourage your local Parks and Recreation Department to allow and facilitate nature play on their properties, wherever it will not significantly harm ecological values.

Most of all, turn off the toys, open the door, and go outside!

More Kidscaping Tips for Your Yard: *Those Summer Nights!*

A child's view of the world is much smaller and more intimate than that of adults, and this is a key factor in providing frequent nature play for your kids! They don't need spectacular vistas or miles of trails to explore and enjoy nature. Instead, they can be engaged for hours with tiny wonders they find right in your own yard, like earthworms, roly-pollies, and butterflies — or small-scale “landscapes” like vegetable and butterfly gardens.

As we move into summertime, long evenings and warm nights offer special magic for nature play. Here are a few suggestions for you to try at night, right outside the back door!

Frog and Toad Calls: Listen carefully to see if you have any of these hoppy neighbors. Bullfrogs have a deep “jug o’ rum” call. Green frogs sound like a flat banjo string being plucked. Spring peepers make a high-pitched “reep” that sounds almost like distant jingle bells. Cricket frogs make a clicking noise, like two stones being tapped together. And the call of American toads is a long, loud trilling.

Moth Baiting: Hang a white bed sheet on your deck or in your yard, and shine a bright light on it for at least 30 minutes. You'll be amazed at the moths and other night-flying insects that show up! If you're lucky, you may even get a spectacular visitor like the beautiful, green Luna moth!

You can also entice moths with bait made by mixing stale beer, rotten bananas, and molasses or sugar. “Brew” this in a dark, warm place until it stinks, then paint it on tree trunks. Return after dark with a lantern to see what you've attracted!

Hot Dogs and S'mores: Use a backyard fire ring or fire bowl to cook hot dogs on a stick, followed by the justly famous outdoor treat of s'mores (melted marshmallows squished with a chocolate bar between two graham crackers). Then settle in for a ghost story or two, maybe some hot chocolate or lemonade, and quiet time spent just watching the flames dance.

Silent Sit: Find comfortable places in your yard or a nearby park where you and your child(ren) can sit in solitude. Use a chair, glider, hammock, cushion, or any other comfy option — but be sure it is a quiet one. Then just be still, listen, and watch. You may hear frogs, insects, and birds, and the stars will become clearer as your eyes adjust to the dark. Plus it will be a great time for thinking and dreaming. (Don't be too surprised, though, if your child contentedly drops off to sleep!)



Fireflies: If you live east of the Rockies, among the charms of summer are fireflies twinkling on sultry evenings. Kids love to capture them in empty jars with air holes in the lid, creating simple lanterns. But release them soon — the males are flashing to attract mates, so they have business to attend to! By the way, female fireflies usually stay low, and various subspecies tend to flash at different heights and at different hours.

Perseid Picnic: The best time to see “shooting stars” is during the annual Perseid meteor shower, which this year will peak in the early morning hours of August 13, in the northeast sky. Why not make a special event out of it? Scout out a dark but cozy spot that's away from city lights, buy some frozen confections en route, and have an ice cream buffet while you watch for nature's own fireworks!

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If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, you appreciate the work we're doing, and you would like to stay informed about it, please support us with an annual contribution! Every gift truly helps, no matter what size — and every one will be gratefully acknowledged.

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Thank you!

The Quiet Side

When people remember nature play, their stories typically focus on active times: exploring woods and meadows, building forts, splashing up the creek, and digging those infamous holes to China. This active engagement with nature is terrific for kids, bringing multiple senses into play, building a firm foundation for future recreational hobbies, and beginning to establish the active physical lifestyles that can help counteract today's obesity epidemic.

There is another side to nature play, though — one that is sometimes overlooked: the quiet, contemplative side. For example: a child using a comfortable, sheltered, and “secret” backyard niche for daydreaming, or to watch for animal shapes in the clouds. Or best friends having a heart-to-heart talk in a little hidden glade, where at other times one of them might curl up to read a book. Older children might use the same kind of space to write in their journal or to do a little sketching. These imaginative and tranquil activities are an important part of the nature play spectrum, and can be its most enduring form. As adults, we may lose the physical ability or adventuresome spirit for the more active outdoor pursuits, but few of us ever lose the joy of watching the sun set over a wilderness lake, or of being transfixed by a woodland campfire, or of just sitting amidst fragrant garden blooms. These are all powerful adult reflections of serene childhood times spent in nature.

"Youngsters must climb trees, to look out across a world that is misty with adventure. New horizons can be seen from tall trees when one is young. But the time comes when one can sit at the foot of such a tree and see even further than the eye could reach from its highest branch."

— Hal Borland

As we strive to restore the child/nature bond, this “quiet side” should be valued. Scout excursions, family nature clubs, and families on vacation should plan time when kids can savor tranquil moments in intimate outdoor settings. Also, landscapes designed for nature play should include sheltered, inviting nooks (separated from more active play areas) that offer comfortable seating — be it a swing, an Adirondack chair, a hammock, or a circle of thick grass.

Nature can offer peace and serenity throughout life, both fueling and honoring our deepest spiritual selves. We should be sure to bring those powerful and contemplative nature experiences into our children's lives.



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