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CONSERVATION CORNER

NATURE: Kids Dig It For A Reason

Raegan Plumb, KLT Guest Editor



Chasing frogs and climbing trees, stick forts and mud pies. It looks like child's play, but it's really much more. Unstructured outdoor playtime boosts our kids' development in areas including creativity, cognition, social ability, and psychological well-being, not to mention physical health. A growing body of research suggests that unstructured "nature play" is imperative for the making of healthy adults, and that forging an emotional connection to nature at an early age ensures that our kids care about conservation when they're grown.

Although just as vital as ever for healthy development, nature play is becoming increasingly tough to squeeze into our fast-paced, tech-driven lives. Childhood has changed so much. Just think, sunshine and dirt must now compete with i-pads and Wii. Who will win? Nature is falling increasingly behind; recent data suggest that American children now spend 8 hours a day with electronic media, and just a matter of moments in the outdoors (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). As parents, grandparents, teachers, and mentors, it's up to us

to provide some balance. Doing so is simpler than you may think.

Providing nature play opportunities for children doesn't require a vacation to a distant, iconic wilderness. Nature play can happen on the smallest of scales. Truly, we need only step outside. Through a child's eye, wild spaces can be a tangle of weeds



in an alley, mud puddles on the playground, a local pocket park, or your own backyard. With an ounce of encouragement and a pinch of imagination, new adventures in nature are suddenly around every corner.

For wonderfully simple ideas on how to cultivate outdoor play spaces to inspire the little people in your life, check out the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association's newly published guide titled "Nature Play" (find it online by searching for Pennsylvania Land Trust / Nature Play). This guide encourages us to overcome inertia, relax the rules, and embrace simplicity. Here are a few of my favorite tips:

Plant a butterfly garden, even if just one or two plants to attract winged visitors.

Need to cut down a tree? Keep a stump or log for balance games.

Shallow water in any form provides hours of wonder, as does a garden hose.

Set aside a corner for a mound of dirt, sand, or gravel, no matter how small.

Provide simple tools (buckets, shovels, rakes, magnifiers, insect nets).

Remember the need for quiet spaces, too.

If there is time for an excursion, we are fortunate to have many wonderful outdoor play resources

within reach. From City Beach and the Pend Oreille Bay trail, to Sherwood Forest, Lake View Park, and the list goes on. We don't have to be professional naturalists to encourage meaningful nature play. We only need to find the time to unplug and get out the door. The benefits to our children are too great to ignore. And who knows, maybe there is something to be gained for you and me as well? Pick a green spot on the map, and go for it.

Kaniksu Land Trust continues to work to protect and promote outdoor play spaces for our community members, both big and small. We couldn't do this important work without the tremendous support we receive from our members. See you outside!

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