

Putting California's Outdoor Bill of Rights into Action

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By Bob Cuddy



Participating in a team sport, playing in a safe place and splashing in the water are three of the 10 'rights' California kids should have experienced before they turn 15.

Telling children they have a formal right to play outdoors seems superfluous, almost silly. After all, they need merely scurry to the door, turn the knob, push it open, and there they are in the great outdoors.

The problem is, not enough youngsters are doing that.

"They do have a right," said Betsy Kiser, director of the San Luis Obispo Parks and Recreation Department. "They aren't taking advantage of it."

About 30 percent of children in San Luis Obispo County and California are overweight, according to Cal Poly's Center for Obesity Prevention and Education.

Last summer, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took note of this, signing the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. Now that spring has sprung, various local public and private agencies are trying to incorporate the bill's principles into their programs for youngsters.

An enthusiastic Pete Jenny, county parks manager and a longtime advocate for the importance of nature to children, has been meeting with other local park directors in an effort to get the campaign started.

With spring here, they have yet to complete a formal coordinated plan, but each agency is working up a course of action.

Kiser said the city sends an activity guide to residents that identifies outdoor activities such as swimming, camping and bicycling.

Jenifer Rhynes, chief executive officer of the San Luis Obispo County YMCA, said the organization "has committed itself to having kids get an appreciation" of the outdoor activities highlighted in the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights.

Kiser and Rhynes understand that, to some, telling kids they have a right to do something obvious might seem unnecessary. But having a right and exercising it are two different things.

"I think you have to require the child to go outside," said Christy O'Hara, an Atascadero mother of four children between 9 and 18. She said hers is an outdoors family, but even so, the children have to be prodded.

http://www.leavenochildinside.com/news/detail/putting_californias_outdoor_bill_of_rights_into_action

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She said one of her younger children has a video game that allows her to interact with virtual puppies. She'd rather play with them than go outside and cavort with the family's two dogs.

Youngsters' addiction to electronic games and television is a given in 21st-century society. The obesity of young people has become an ominous cliché, with dark portents for their childhood and later in life.

"American kids between 6 and 18 spend 6.5 hours a day with electronic media," Jenny said. "That's scary. How can they appreciate the majesty of a 500-year-old oak tree when they haven't seen one?"

The increased tendency of youngsters to stay indoors is bad from a developmental point of view, Rhynes added.

"Imaginative play happens in the outdoors," Rhynes said, and children who don't play "lose the ability to self-regulate."

Rick Mathews of the county Parks and Recreation Commission calls this "nature deficit disorder" and "electronically enhanced neglect."

Parents up and down the state have been taking note of this for nearly a decade. So when Schwarzenegger signed the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights last summer, local outdoors and children's advocates jumped on board.

Schwarzenegger worked with the California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism, a volunteer group comprising public and private organizations at the federal, state and local levels.

The governor encouraged parents, educators and others to "do all they can to help our state's children experience and enjoy the wonders of Mother Nature."

Jenny is contemplating giving out a card that lists the 10 activities that make up the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and having parents and youngsters check off each one as they complete it.

As Jenny pointed out, they don't have to reinvent the bicycle wheel.

"We don't need to do new stuff," he said. "We just will brand what we're doing already."

A big part of making the Children's Bill of Rights more than a feel-good slogan is reaching out to parents and getting them involved, park directors said.

"It's to make a statement," Kiser said. "Children are not experiencing the outdoors."