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Plan touts 'no child left inside'

Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights urges kids to discover nature.

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As a child psychologist, some of Dr. Claude Arnett's best therapy isn't done in his office.

He takes a walk along the American River Parkway with his troubled charges. Most have never taken that kind of walk before. "We look at fish. We've seen turkeys and deer and rabbits," Arnett said.

"The children relax," he said. Healing begins.

The California Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, endorsed recently by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, lists 10 activities kids should experience by the time they turn 14, including exploring nature and learning how to swim.

Created by the California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism, the list includes activities that were once typical childhood pursuits, such as catching a fish and following a trail.

Those sorts of outdoor adventures are becoming increasingly challenging for children because of urbanization and because kids are more plugged into indoor technology, say child advocates who are rallying for a national movement to get kids outdoors again.

Not only is the outdoors regarded as a cure for the childhood obesity epidemic, but getting close to nature also could be key in diminishing childhood learning disorders, advocates say.

One 2005 California study of 255 disadvantaged sixth-graders showed their science scores increased by 27 percent after they attended science classes outside.

"This is not about nostalgia. It's what's good," said Cheryl Charles. She is president of the Children and Nature Network, a nonprofit organization founded to promote the principles

in the best-seller "Last Child in the Woods -- Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder" by San Diego author Richard Louv.

Research indicates that regular outdoor activity lowers stress and hyperactivity in children, Charles said.

"Children are literally happier, healthier and smarter and more cooperative in the classroom," said Charles, who is a former school administrator.

Arnett, of Vaya Mental Health Resources in Sacramento, incorporates outdoor experiences into his treatment. Some older children who tilled soil at an organic farm as part of their therapy have taken to planting their own gardens, he said.

Louv said by e-mail that policymakers, health care professionals, schools and urban designers all have a hand in connecting children to the outdoors, but the foremost influence is parents and adult relatives.

"For a parent who missed out on nature as a child, we say, 'Now's your chance,' " he said.

Rather than structured activities such as physical education classes or organized sports, Louv stresses the need for just plain old play.

In Louv's research, he cites a raft of scientific studies that suggest the demise of outdoor play.

Between 1981 and 2003, free play and discretionary time for children shrank by nine hours a week, according to two studies. In a 2003 study, 71 percent of adults said they had walked or ridden a bike to school, compared with 22 percent of children.

Another 2002 study found that 25 percent of 8-year-olds can name more Pokémon characters than wildlife species.

A Kaiser Family Foundation study in 2005 and 2006 found children between 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours daily with electronic media.

Besides the lure of electronic gadgetry, children are more housebound because of a heightened fear of abduction, disappearing open space and urban design that discourages walking, said Nina Gordon, chairwoman of California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism.

"Kids are not going to throw away their iPods," Gordon said. But technology, such as GPS devices, also could spark an interest in the outdoors, she said.

For economically disadvantaged children, safety in the neighborhood and transportation are obstacles that will require greater public investment, Gordon said.

Governors in at least 10 states, including California, have undertaken initiatives to promote what is billed in some states as "No Child Left Inside." The efforts vary from free entry to state parks for foster families in Connecticut to the nation's first collaboration between schools and state parks in New Mexico.

In California, the state Department of Parks and Recreation offers camping and beach trips for inner-city kids and training for older youth and adults to lead outdoor expeditions.

"This is a serious public health and spiritual health issue," said Ruth Coleman, California's state parks director, who is chairwoman of a national committee of state and national parks representatives focused on outdoor opportunities for youths.

If the connection to the outdoors withers, so will the environmental movement, she said. "How do you preserve your planet in the next generation?"

On a recent sun-filled afternoon, 11-year-old Jordan Resta balanced on his new skateboard and rolled down a sidewalk at McKinley Park in east Sacramento. Jordan, who is from Adelfia, Italy, was ending a two-month stay with his grandparents who live near the park.

In his village, he and his twin sister get out of school in the early afternoon and play outside until the sunlight fades.

"Everybody knows each other," he said. His American friends in east Sacramento seem to spend a lot more time inside than he's used to, he said.

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