

Wild About Nature

How much time are you spending in the "great outdoors"?

What did you see on your way to work?

How long has it been since you felt grass between your toes? What does the sky look like today? When did you last lie in the grass and gaze at the clouds?

You may be overdue for a dose of Vitamin N!

Our beautiful environment is sadly being underutilised and the effects on our health and the health of our children is suffering as a result. Increasing levels of research into depression, anxiety and other health problems is returning the findings that close proximity to green spaces reduces the prevalence of these issues in children and adults.¹ Additionally children who experience high levels of contact with nature have higher levels of self-worth and cognitive function.

A literature review by Deakin University of the current research being undertaken found that those people living in greener spaces with access to gardens were more likely to experience less stress, were less overweight and had lower levels of disease. In fact, a consequence of fewer facilities for outdoor physical activity and unsafe play spaces was found to have a substantial impact on the long term health of a community. The Japanese term shinrin-yoku, or "forest bathing", sounds poetic but the noticeable health benefits identified in Japanese research of the impact of "forest bathing" where participants spent time in forests is for many essential knowledge in the fight against disease. One piece of research reported a 50% increase in cancer fighting cells shown in women who spent two consecutive days of a few hours in a forest setting. The innate attraction and connection to nature possessed by humans cannot be underestimated in the research that is being undertaken – we are and will remain 'biophilic'. Nature is essential to our health.

This biological need for nature is an opportunity to recognise outdoor play and adventuring as critical to our children's health and as important to children as sleep. Less exposure to healthy bacteria in nature some research is indicating might be a result in part to rising rates of allergies and autoimmune disorders.



We are at a moment in time where we must stop and reengage with the simplicity of our natural world and consider the impacts for our children and for ourselves if we do not.

The term coined by Richard Louv as "nature deficit disorder" has the potential to not just damage health but also to have long-term implications for the future of our environment.

Another argument for ensuring our children are engaging with nature is also to ensure that we maintain a growing and committed community engagement with environmental issues. You cannot appreciate or feel passionate for something you have never known. The future of our world relies on "eco-literacy" achieved through the transfer of passion and knowledge about the environment. These skills associated with the environment have been declining as we move towards more urbanised and risk adverse societies. Our need to sanitise and

make safe the world around our children may inevitably lead to the destruction of that world.

Armed with this knowledge we need to see a daily dose of what Richard Louv calls "Vitamin N" as essential, not just for our children but for us all. Even pictures of nature can have an impact with researchers reporting the benefits of viewing pictures of nature as subjects exercised resulted in an 8.7% decrease in blood pressure compared with 1.9% decrease for those looking at a blank screen and a 3.3% increase in blood pressure for those looking at unpleasant pictures. Just looking at a natural scene activates parts of the brain associated with balance and happiness. In a study at Chonnam National University in South Korea, subjects shown images of nature experienced heightened activity in parts of the brain linked to positive outlook, happiness and emotional stability. Taking time to admire a view or a piece of natural scenery takes on a new level of meaning when we appreciate the health benefits that flow from it.

Reflecting on the benefits identified in the research in our modern day service contexts should result in our planning being focused on a greater awareness of the type and location of



activities we are facilitating in our services. Excursions to parks and natural play spaces, afternoon teas becoming picnics, opportunities to move indoor activities outdoors and time to just cloud gaze should become mandatory not incidental experiences.

Green is good for you! If we want to have a healthy life, if you are committed to ensuring our children are healthy, both physically and mentally it is time to make room for it in our day. Even a 2012 study by German researchers concluded that glimpsing a green triangle can trigger greater creativity than rectangles of other shades.

So what are you waiting for? Step outside, look up in the sky, look down at the grass and make exploring and engaging nature as fundamental to your daily routine as cleaning your teeth (you DO clean your teeth don't you??)

"In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we have been taught."

- Baba Dioum (1968)

1 Townsend, M., Weerasuriya, R. Beyond Blue to Green: The Health Benefits of Contact with Nature in a Park Context

This editorial originally appeared in "Network News" June 2014 edition