

THE GIFT OF NATURE

When you arrive home today, please do an experiment: Stand outside in front of your home and listen. What do you hear? Do you hear children playing? Unfortunately, the answer is likely to be no. The fact is that children are not playing outside as often as they used to be. Why do you suppose this? One reason is that many adults fear children may become ill if they get too dirty, too warm or too cold. Also, children spend a considerable amount of time inside watching television, working on computers or playing electronic games. Finally, a reason children are playing outside less is that many are overscheduled. They lack the time to play outside because of family commitments. It seems that instead of allowing children to experience the gift of nature, we are keeping them from it.

By not allowing children to experience nature, we may actually be harming them. Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, has studied the effects on children having under-developed senses, displaying attention problems and having higher rates of physical and emotional problems.

Louv says that is it highly beneficial for children to spend time in nature. It aids in the development of their physical, social and emotional skills. Children can gain natural physical exercise while playing outside. They develop many of their large and small muscle skills by running, jumping, climbing, and pedaling. Children develop socially by communicating with peers. Emotionally, they develop a sense of self and independence throughout their explorations.

Encourage your children's outside play:

- Have a large area that allows for sand, paint, water, clay, etc. Children can be free and creative. They will not have to worry about how much of the materials may spill.
- Have a variety of balls. Encourage kicking, throwing, catching, rolling as well as hiding. One great idea is to bury balls in mounds of leaves, snow, sand, etc.
- Have lots of safe, loose materials for building. Sanded wood pieces, large PVC pipes, cardboard boxes, fabrics, and Plexiglas work well. Children can combine these items and leave up their constructions without having to worry about cleaning them up to make room for something else.
- Go on nature walks and hikes. Hide items in your outside space to encourage seek and find games.

Think back to your own childhood. What were your favorite ways to play outside? Give your children the gift of nature by sharing your favorites with them. Offer them opportunities to experience the incredible wonders the natural world has to offer.