

THE DURANGO HERALD

Getting children into nature helps create healthy communities

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Each day in the paper we read about more budget cuts being made, both in our schools and local governments. As we look at these cuts here in Durango, it is important to take stock of what is essential - what matters to the health and development of future generations.

Studies have shown that a connection between children and nature is one of the essential components to a brighter future. In fact, it has been shown that this connection may be one of the key factors in improving public health, education and economics, as well as human happiness.

Many will remember the book by Richard Louv published in 2005 entitled Last Child in the Woods. This book focused on what has been termed "nature-deficit disorder" and the effect it is having on children growing up today. Nature-deficit disorder was found to be a contributing factor to many problems affecting children today, from obesity to attention deficit disorder to depression.

Today, the movement to connect children to nature continues to grow, partly because of the work of an organization called the Children and Nature Network, or C&NN, which provides access to the latest news and research focused on the connection between children and nature. According to C&NN, "Beyond programs and legislation, our ultimate goal is deep cultural change, connecting children to nature, so they can be healthier, happier and smarter."

The benefits of being in nature are enormous and include increased imagination, problem-solving skills, self-confidence and the ability to focus. Another study shows that children who are in nature each day are more physically active, more aware of nutrition and more civil to each other. And, on top of all this, children who are involved in environmental education programs increase their science testing scores by 27 percent.

But the pressures on children to stay inside are great. The lure of electronics, the lack of parental involvement, the lack of funding for environmental education programs and lack of green space in some communities all contribute to children not spending enough time in nature. This is also a problem for the environment itself. Kids who do not learn to understand and appreciate nature do not have the same drive to preserve it in the future.

The C&NN said focal points must be identified to make sure a connection with nature is known to be essential for healthy communities. Of these focal points, nature centers and schools bear the largest responsibility.

Therefore, Durango Nature Studies has a responsibility to our community to do the work that we do to connect children with the natural world. We must know about and promote the emotional and cognitive benefits for children who feel a connection with the natural world. This is what we try to do through our programs. To learn more about the studies supporting the importance of environmental education, visit the Children and Nature Network at www.childrenandnature.org.

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