

Environment

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Reconnecting with great outdoors

Children and their families get back to nature and health

By LISA PURCELL

Many adults recall childhood with fond memories of time outside — riding bicycles, climbing trees, exploring the woods, making snow forts. The changing seasons meant varied play activities and different chores, whether weeding the garden, raking leaves or shoveling snow.

But the ways children spend their free time have undergone a profound change over the past two decades. Gone are the days of building fairy houses and watching clouds.

As play space designer Randy White warns, childhood and outdoor play are no longer synonymous. In a 2004 survey of 830 mothers nationwide, 70 percent reported playing outdoors every day when they were young but said that only 31 percent of their children did so. Reasons given for this decline included safety and fear of crime and increased dependence on digital media and television. A 2010 report from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the average 8- to 18-year-old American now spends more than 53 hours a week “using entertainment media.”

Even very young children are affected. Susan Smiel at the Caverly Preschool in Pittsford recalls a 3-year-old student pausing in play to remark on how quiet it was in the preschool. “Where’s the TV?” he asked.

But across the country, parents, pediatricians, child care providers, educators and others are working to reverse this trend. Stephen Kellert, a researcher on child development and nature, reports that a child’s healthy development is linked to the quality of his or her experiences in nature.

In his book “Last Child in the Woods,” author Richard Louv discusses some of the benefits of outdoor play for children: significant reduction in symptoms of attention deficit disorder in children as young as 5 years old; improved motor abilities and increased creativity; and increased self-discipline and self-confidence, including among children with disabilities.

Children play differently outdoors. They can be loud and run around. They get dirty and make a mess. According to early-childhood educator Joanne Pye, “Children learn a lot about themselves when they play outdoors. They run, climb and jump across puddles. Sometimes they fall down and get wet, and that’s a

learning opportunity, too.”

Child care provider Melissa Tripp includes outside playtime in her program in Pittsford every day. “Sure there are some challenges,” she notes. “The short winter days mean my school-aged kids come home, get a snack, put on their layers and go right outside, and still only have a half hour of daylight.” And with the younger children, just getting everyone’s winter clothes on is a hurdle.

“There’s always something new outside,” Tripp says. “Deer ate the tops off the carrots in the garden and left tracks in the soil. We all had a good time figuring out who the visitor was.”

“We spend some time outside every day,” says Caverly Preschool’s Smiel. “Children need the fresh air and some unstructured play time. So we have tricycles and helmets, wagons and scooters, in addition to the play equipment.”

The Pittsford Recreation Department trails connect Caverly Preschool with the town recreation center. Every Friday is Hike Day at the preschool, and children spend a longer block of time outside exploring.

According to early-childhood educator Laura Peterson, “Group dynamics really change outside. Children learn to listen, to pay attention, to take responsibility for themselves. It’s important that children get into the habit of being outside to get comfortable in nature.”

Pye agrees. “And it’s best when this happens at school, at day care and at home. There are lots of outdoor places to explore nearby. Here in Pittsford, the recreation center’s trails are just great for family walks.”

Many Vermont communities recognize the growing need for outdoor recreation space for children and families. Thousands of man-hours have gone into building trails crisscrossing Rutland City’s 300-acre Pine Hill Park. West Rutland’s marsh boardwalk attracts people of all ages interested in nature viewing.

Last year a group of adult and student volunteers constructed hiking trails and an outdoor pavilion on property adjoining Barstow Memorial School in Chittenden. Similar community parks and recreation areas are common throughout the state.

Vermont has plenty of natural areas to enjoy, but many of today’s younger adults did not grow up playing outside much themselves and so aren’t comfortable taking their own children outdoors.



LISA PURCELL

Melissa Tripp and three young scientists birdwatch with their homemade binoculars.

Recognizing this culture shift, many environmental education organizations have programs designed to connect families with nature. Four Winds Nature Institute’s nature program and knee-high nature workshops bring adults and children outside to learn and explore together. National Wildlife Federation’s “be out there” campaign provides ideas for raising happier, healthier children with a lifelong love of nature. And Vermont’s many local nature centers offer family-centered events in every season.

Last year Caverly Preschool and Four Winds partnered to host a family fun in nature day at the Pittsford Recreation Center for preschoolers and their families.

“We wanted to give parents some ideas for just playing outside with their children,” says Pye. “So we floated pine

cones in the stream and watched them twirl through the rapids. We gave family teams paint color strips and had them collect bits of leaves and bark and grass that matched the colors. We got in the water and looked for critters under rocks and logs.”

Given that list of benefits Louv cites for children in nature, making outside time a priority in the family schedule is important. What will you do out there? Follow your children’s lead, appreciate the wonders they find, listen to their stories, play and just enjoy each other and the great outdoors.

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