



Rewilding Our Kids

Dandelion, fern, heron, lark, mistletoe, nectar, otter: these are just a few of the words describing the natural world that have been deleted from the Oxford Children's Dictionary. The words that replaced them include, among others: blog, celebrity, MP3, and ironically, cut and paste.

The reason? Apparently words related to nature aren't being used enough.

It's a shocking fact which inevitably leads to a serious question - are we raising children with little interest in the natural world, so much so, that words associated with it have no place in their vocabulary?

Or is it more about a loss of contact with nature, fueled by the rational and sometimes irrational parental fears that keep kids inside. A situation compounded by cities that have gobbled up many of the forests and fields kids once roamed through and turned them into green deserts and suburban homes.

I'd lay money disinterest isn't the problem, and there's evidence to back that up. In a recent UK survey of 1000 kids, ages 5 to 14, researchers found that the desire to be outside in nature is alive and well in the hearts and minds of children. So much so that 76% of those polled wanted to spend *more* time in nature, and a majority wanted better access to it.

In other words, kids want nature near them, within walking distance, not in greenspace or park a half hour car ride away.

So if children want to play outside, preferably someplace green, what's stopping them?

Well, I think it's partly related to another phrase that's dropped out of our vocabulary. It was an order my mother frequently directed at me once I reached the ripe old age of 6 or 7 - "Go and play outside." And I always followed orders, usually with my friends, playing in the backyard or on our bikes, tunneling through snow drifts or on sidewalks chalked for hopscotch, often without an adult in sight.

Now, it seems, we've become a society terrified at the thought of kids playing outside. So resistant, that Winnipeggers who allow their kids to play out of doors - even in their own yards - run the risk of being reported to Child and Family Services.

This, when evidence shows that potential threats to kids are significantly exaggerated. Child abductions by strangers, for example, are exceptionally rare, just .1% of a 1000 cases. And children are eight times more likely to die in a car accident as a passenger than a pedestrian.

Despite those numbers, many of us continue to keep our children at home, staring at computers and smart phones, or in rec centers, dance studios and hockey arenas. And we spend much of our time in cars, chauffeuring them to indoor activities.

Which helps to explain why kids between the ages of 5 and 17 spend, at *minimum*, three hours a day staring at screens, and why 75% of 5 to 11-year-olds spend less than an hour a day outside.

Which is a problem, because medical experts maintain that keeping kids inside may put their health and future wellbeing at risk.

That's because nature benefits children's health in a variety of ways - from improved lung function to better bone density. A Finish study demonstrated that outdoor play can even boost a child's immune system.

That study tracked 75 kids who played in an urban area transformed from gravel yards into mini forests. Within a month, every child showed improved immune function, which was correlated with exposure to the diversity of microbes found in nature - microbes the body needs to stay healthy.

Plus there are other benefits to playing outside as Quebec paediatrician, Dr Emilie Beaulieu, has observed - it allows kids to take risks: "Based on the research, we know that risky play is very helpful for physical health...It's also beneficial for mental health, including better self-esteem and better friendships..."

And allowing kids to take risks doesn't mean throwing safety out the window. It simply means giving them a little more room to explore the natural world with their friends, whether in a local park, a nearby woodland or their own backyard.

Finally, there's another reason why our kids need time outside. If you've never seen a nesting bird, been startled by a garter snake slipping through the grass or built a fort in a forest, chances are you won't care if they disappear. You have to be in nature – experience it physically and emotionally - in order to care about it.

And given our current environmental challenges isn't that what we should be shooting for – a generation of kids who love nature so passionately, they're willing to fight to protect it?