



No child left indoors: Outdoor Discovery Center in Holland reintroduces a generation of kids to nature

Published: Tuesday, August 03, 2010, 5:16 AM



Myron Kukla | The Grand Rapids Press

Enlarge

Jessica Scott | The Grand Rapids Press

Ryan Toereing, 10, of St. Joesph, pets a painted turtle being passed around. (Jessica Scott | The Grand Rapids Press)

No Child Left Inside gallery (5 photos)

HOLLAND — Eight-year-old Ella Lubberts put her finger out to give a tentative touch to a 12-inch garter snake, then quickly withdrew her hand.

"I thought it would be slimy, but it wasn't. I liked touching the turtle better," said Ella, one of about 40 children attending an Outdoor Discovery Center Wetland Critters program at the Holland State Park last week.

She and the other children and their parents were introduced to a group of amphibians and reptiles that likely live in culverts and wetlands all around their neighborhoods. The one-hour nature show, discussion and touching traveling exhibit is a regular event at parks and nature areas around Ottawa and Allegan counties put on through the year by the Fillmore Township-base Outdoor Discovery Center-Macatawa Greenway. The center's No Child Left Indoors program brings kids to nature and helps them learn about the wonders of the great outdoors.

"We do year-round outdoor programs at the center and, in summer, get children out for excursions to area nature areas and parks," said Jamie Krupka, a naturalist who runs outdoor programs at the Outdoor Discovery Center in Fillmore Township.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, today's children spend 90 percent of their lives indoors with 23 percent participating in no physical activity.

"Some kids spend eight to 10 minutes a day outdoors going from home or school to transportation. It's a docile lifestyle with physical problems that could make this generation of kids have a shorter life expectancy than their parents," Krupka said.

IF YOU GO

Outdoor fundraiser

When: 5 p.m. Aug. 25

Where: Windmill Island, Holland

Cost: \$5 per person; tickets at odcofwu.schoolwires.com.

Details: Money raised will help fund the center and the Macatawa Greenway and the No Child Left Inside program.

Evening will include: A walk around Windmill Island marsh, a Michigan-themed dinner and an auction of outdoor-themed items such as a vacation at a Northwoods cabin on a lake, a bulldozer ride, and salmon fishing with a sport fishing legend.

How nature helps

The Holland Area No Child Left Inside Initiative recommends children have 1-2 hours of free play time outdoors each week.

Here are some of the benefits:

- Children who play outside develop stronger immune systems.
- Spending time outdoors can lessen the symptoms of attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- Spending 30 minutes a day outside can result in a better night's sleep.
- Viewing nature can reduce stress, increase attention span and decrease anger or aggression.

Source: Outdoor Discovery Center Macatawa Greenway

About once a week, he takes nature to children with his Wetland Critters show, letting them get up close with snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders.

"There's so much to see, do and learn outdoors, and kids today are losing out on it," Krupka said. "In one generation, our children have gone from outside explorers to indoor screen-watchers, which people are starting to realize is not healthy."

Founded in 2000 with funding from the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District and Wildlife Unlimited of Ottawa and Allegan counties, the Outdoor Discovery Center operates a 130-acre nature preserve and educational center at 4214 56th St. in Fillmore Township.

The center's outdoor educational focus is part of a growing movement that started in the early part of the century to get families to rediscover nature. The movement's strongest voice has been Richard Louv, whose 2005 book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" helped people recognize a generation of children had lost contact with the natural world.

His book presents evidence that regular contact with nature helps maintain good physical and emotional health.

National groups such as the Children & Nature Network and regional Nature Clubs for Families have sprung up to encourage outdoor activities.

Local experts in early childhood education also believe time spent outdoors in recreational and learning activities is helpful for overall development.

"Kids today spend a lot of face time in front of TVs, cell phones and computers screens, which wires the brain to see things and then move on without absorbing information because they can call it back up whenever they want," said Pat Verduin, coordinator of the Ready for School initiative in Holland.

Verduin's organization — which promotes pre-school education to prepare children in the Holland-Zeeland area for kindergarten — has helped sponsor several of the No Child Left Indoors programs.

"When children spend time outdoors, they experience the world with all five senses. It helps them become inquisitive, problem solvers, and expands the learning process," she said.

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