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Connecting to the Natural World is Important to Our Personal Development

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Connecting to the Natural World is Important to Our Personal Development

By Nathan Vink

UCF Forum columnist

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I have vivid memories from my childhood of traipsing through the woods near our house, a forest that had yet to be razed and developed, as it would be decades later. The pines and maples grew thick and laid down a soft bed of leaves to walk along.

My friends and I would make up elaborate stories about the things we found along the way. Occasionally we would run from barking dogs when we got too close to the forest border and get lost every once in a while.

I feel lucky to have grown up with the freedom to explore the natural world around me. I truly believe the human spirit is grounded in nature, making a connection to the natural world important in personal development.

That's why we must continue to educate our children in all that the natural world holds.

During my career in outdoor education, the goal of getting young people outside and experiencing nature in an exciting way is always present.

In Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods*, he speaks of the growing gap between children and the outdoors and the physical and mental repercussions. He theorizes that rises in obesity, ADHD and depression in children correlate with spending less time outdoors and more time inside plugged in and stagnant. I am one that adheres to this line of thinking and while other factors certainly exist, today's children have less connection to the natural world than ever before.

As a father of a 6-year-old, I'm always excited and nervous to introduce my son to new experiences, especially in the outdoors. This summer my family spent a week camping along the Arkansas River in the mountains near Buena Vista, Colorado. We came together with two other families with children the same age as our son. Our connection to these families stretches back long ago to when we all began working as outdoor educators and guides. The friendships run deep and we were excited to connect again, as parents but also as our children.

When we arrived I was struck by how quickly the kids got past shyness and hang-ups and began exploring the area. We watched their imaginations at full potential as they created new worlds out of thin air.

The creativity among the families began to grow, as one father brought out his knife and a couple pieces of wood and began fashioning rudimentary boats for each of the kids. The parents and kids worked together to move rocks and boulders around to create a miniature river course along the shore. Hours were spent running the boats along the current and fixing different channels with new rocks. What had started as a little project to pass some time had turned into hours of imaginative play, stemming from a lack of distractions and a freedom to create.

Kurt Hahn, educator and founder of Outward Bound nonprofit education organization, once said, "I regard it as the foremost task of education: to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion." These five qualities would become the tenets by which the Outward Bound philosophy was created.

I spent eight years educating others in the outdoors based on these ideas and I strongly believe in what they stand for.

Just by putting our children in the outdoor environment while we were on vacation, I was able to witness each and every one of the tenets take place with little or no effort.

This is what all children should learn from the natural world. The freedom they will experience will benefit them more than we can imagine.

To put it simply, just let the mountains do the talking.

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