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Addressing Nature Deficit Disorder Through Primitive Camping Experiences

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Abstract: Today's youth suffer from Nature Deficit Disorder, a condition that has been connected to ADHD, shortage of creativity, and general lack of knowledge about the outdoors. A team of educators and specialists are addressing this issue with primitive camping. County educators were trained using experiential learning and train-the-trainer techniques. Through these methods, educators are now confident about teaching and leading primitive camping experiences. The ultimate result from the project is 4-H educators taking more youth camping and getting them out-of-doors. Primitive camping experiences can help youth overcome Nature Deficit Disorder and its associated symptoms.

Introduction

In his 2006 book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv tells of schools eliminating hands-on nature study from the curriculum in an effort to increase standardized test scores. Beyond the changes in school curriculum, the busy lives of today's over-stretched and over-stressed parents allow little time for outdoor activities.

Unlike earlier generations, many of today's parents see the outdoors as a dangerous place. They fear strangers and kidnappings, gangs and drug dealers taking over parks and vacant corner lots, and encroaching wildlife from mountain lions to virus-bearing mosquitoes that have been sensationalized by the media. We have scared children straight out of the woods and fields (Louv, 2006).

As a result, children are exhibiting what has been labeled "Nature Deficit Disorder." The term describes a set of symptoms linked to our separation from nature. These include an increase in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), childhood obesity, a lack of creativity and curiosity, ignorance of local flora and fauna, and a diminishing sense of community (Louv, 2006).

Fortunately, there is an antidote for nature deficit disorder—getting children back outside. A growing body of research demonstrates that when children have hands-on experiences with nature, they reap the benefits. Researchers (Strife & Downey, 2009; Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Wells, 2000; Wells & Evans, 2003) cite diminishment in levels of ADHD, fewer incidents of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem, enhanced brain development, higher levels of curiosity and creativity, and a sense of connectedness to the community and the environment.

4-H camping programs have traditionally focused on camp settings where youth stay in cabins at a campground facility. It can be challenging to "reconnect" youth with the natural environment, as the conveniences offered at these camp facilities often do not provide the desired outdoor experience.

To help address the need of getting youth back outside, Getting Back to Basics, a primitive camp training, was developed to provide Extension educators with the knowledge, skills, and equipment necessary to plan and conduct a non-traditional 4-H camp experience designed to reconnect youth with nature and assist in developing a desirable land stewardship ethic. Schlink (2000) found that natural resource camps provide unique opportunities for young people to come together to learn a specific subject matter while interacting with peers and adults.

Program Description

To encourage youth and adults to get back outside, a team of four county educators and the state natural resources youth specialist secured a grant to purchase primitive camping equipment and resources to train and prepare county educators to implement outdoor camping experiences.

Fourteen Extension educators participated in a 3-day and 2-night camping experience. The "train-the-trainer" model was used to demonstrate hands-on, experiential learning techniques targeted at "primitive" camping.

Educational programs included natural resource topics (tree, plant, animal, and bird identification), orienteering (GPS and compass), outdoor cooking, food safety, proper camp fire preparation, basic first aid, camp safety, risk management, and set-up, care, and maintenance of camp equipment.

Methodology and Findings

Camping participants completed an evaluation instrument immediately following their camping experience. The instrument consisted of six Likert-type scale questions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Quantitative results were summarized using percentages (Table 1).

Table 1.
Participant's Perceptions of Knowledge Gained During Camping Training

Evaluation Question	Percentage Ranking by Category		
	Disagree	Undecided	Agree

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Before participating in this training, did you believe that primitive camping was a viable method to educating 4-H members about nature?	22	43	7	14	14
After participating in this training, do you believe that primitive camping is a viable method to educating 4-H members about nature?	7	-	-	50	43
I had adequate knowledge of primitive camping techniques before attending this training?	14	30	21	21	14
My knowledge of primitive camping techniques has increased through participation in this training?	-	7	7	50	36
Prior to attending this training, I felt adequately prepared to conduct a primitive camp?	14	51	14	7	14
After attending this training, I feel adequately prepared to conduct a primitive camp?	-	-	14	57	29

In addition, the survey instrument included two open-ended questions to collect qualitative data regarding camping information usage and recommendations for training improvement. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.
Participant's Recommendations for Program Application and Improvement

How will you use the training you received?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enhance the camping program already in place • Leadership training with teens • I now have access to equipment to conduct tent camping programs
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<p>What can we do to improve these trainings/workshops?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More emphasis on risk management and first aid • Provide additional in-services to allow more educators access to the equipment • Allow extension educators with tent camping experience the opportunity to present information
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Conclusions and Recommendations

Evaluation results indicate the following.

- Participating 4-H educators believe that "primitive" camping is a viable method for educating youth about nature,
- Attending the training changed educators perceptions of their ability to plan and conduct a primitive camping experience, and
- As a result of the training, educators are confident to conduct a primitive camping educational program.

Evaluation results illustrate how the train-the-trainer method and experiential learning changed educators' perceptions of primitive camping programs. By experiencing firsthand primitive camping, combined with basic camping principles, educators became confident in their ability to lead quality primitive camping experiences.

Using evaluation results and participant feedback, 4-H specialists and educators from across the nation can confidently offer primitive camping trainings to address the negative effects of being separated from nature. While educational topics offered during any learning experience are important, those presented during the program described here are only suggestions. Camping gear and food, whether provided by the camp program or brought by the participants, are the material necessities. With educational topics and equipment the program can be replicated to meet desired goals and objectives. Involving Extension educators in planning and conducting similar trainings provides them the opportunity to share their professional knowledge and skills for enhancing the 4-H "primitive" camping program.

The ultimate result is taking more youth camping and getting them out-of-doors as participation in primitive camping experiences can help youth overcome symptoms associated with Nature Deficit Disorder.

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