

Reflection Paper

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to compare my personal feelings about the impacts nature-connectedness to relevant research and determine if my assumptions about nature-connectedness are credible or if reevaluation is necessary.

Introduction

I am a father of two teenaged boys. While my children are a source of great pride and accomplishment for me, I struggle with certain aspects of parenting. I would consider my thirteen-year-old son to be the easier child to parent. He makes good grades without being asked. He is not very rebellious. He is typically compliant and generally takes constructive criticism fairly well. My fifteen-year-old son, Creed, is more challenging. Although I would consider him to be more intelligent than his younger brother, his grades are often very poor. He is often argumentative and does not take criticism well. He struggles to pay attention in class or to focus on one subject for very long. After many years of working with him, we decided to get a professional opinion. He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD). This diagnosis presented me with an internal struggle. His physician recommended pharmaceutical treatment. My wife and I have some preconceived notions about ADHD treatment and the decision to medicate our child has been a difficult one. My instinctive feeling toward medication for my child is that I should avoid it unless totally necessary. With that thought in mind, I am constantly looking for alternatives to medicine that could serve as a treatment for my son.

I have discovered that most of his struggles stem from the structure of his school environment. When he is not attending school, his symptoms are much less prominent.

On one occasion, he received a one-day suspension for a behavioral issue. As a punishment, I decided that I would take the day off and he and I would spend the normal school day chopping and stacking wood. I felt that a day of outside hard work could help him appreciate school. I also thought he may recognize the type of work that awaited him if he was not able to attend college because of his poor academic performance. However, as we worked outside, I noticed his attitude seemed to improve. Soon he was enjoying the work and the camaraderie that it produced. After cutting and stacking five trees of wood, he was eager to move to another task and complete a new project. I admit that I was nonplussed. I began to ask myself why my son's attitude had steadily improved while being punished. My conclusion was that I had found an environment that better suited him. He thrived in a natural environment. He drew energy from work and accomplishment. He enjoyed the individualized attention. My punishment had become a reward. That day began to change the way I measured success and failure for Creed. Although I had always understood that not everyone is made for the classroom, I had not fully appreciated what it must be like for him to spend the majority of his time in an environment that saps his energy and enthusiasm. As we discuss the resources that have been presented in our class, I have used my son as a type of filter to help me draw personal conclusions from the research.

Children in Nature

I am intrigued by the link between developmental outcomes and green space. One of the first observations that drew my attention was the link between green space and a rise in personal autonomy, improved self-concept, a greater capacity for taking action, and improved interpersonal skills (Kellert & Derr, 1998). I was able to observe

changes related to these outcomes with my son in just one day of nature-connectedness. As I think back to other youth projects, I consider how other youth I serve were positively impacted by outdoor spaces and group tasks. While building orphanages in a field in Thailand, I witnessed much improved personal autonomy among students. I observed higher than normal instances of taking action and working together. Similar to how Louv discussed the Chinese Taoists that created gardens they believed to be beneficial to their health (Louv, 2008), I know that these outcomes should occur in these environments, but having research that confirms this is rewarding. Without the research, it is easy to make assumptions that because many people have drawn similar conclusions in the past, an assumption must be true. However, when we combine historical beliefs with current research, it helps to strengthen my belief of the benefits of nature to humans.

I am also intrigued by the concept of biophilia (Louv, 2008). The urge for humans to affiliate with other forms of life also seems natural to me because of my belief in biblical creation. While I understand that this belief may not be popular, it helps me understand why a connection should exist between humans and other forms of life, because they were created to exist together. Some may consider this an evolutionary construct, however, I believe that the result is the same. We are connected to our planet and the lives of those species with which we coexist. I believe that we have a natural desire to steward the Earth and we seem to be losing that over time. I agree with Dr. Elaine Brooks' idea that people are unlikely to value something they cannot name (Louv, 2008). However, I would also add that people are unlikely to value something to which they do not feel personally connected. This seems a difficult

problem to overcome. Technology seems to draw us further away from the things to which our brains want to be connected. Michael Gurian stated, "Our brains are set up for an agrarian, nature-oriented existence that came into focus five thousand years ago" (Louv, 2008, p. 103). If that is true, then there could definitely be a neurological lag that may contribute to the onset of ADHD and similar diagnoses.

I was also intrigued by the concepts of informal play in natural spaces. I remember, as a child, how often we would make up games or use natural materials to create things that we did not have. We would play baseball with a walnut and sticks. We would pretend to be superheroes with nothing but a stick and a rope. We were required to use our imagination for play. For American children, I fear using one's imagination is becoming a lost art. Robin Moore says that, "Natural spaces and materials stimulate children's limitless imaginations and serve as the medium of inventiveness and creativity observable in almost any group of children playing in a natural setting" (Louv, 2008, p. 89). I totally agree with his assessment. Children seem to be losing their creativity. More than ever, they appear to need to be entertained instead of finding creative ways to entertain themselves. In one study that compared green space and built space, research showed that children in green spaces engaged in more creative forms of play than those in built spaces (Kirkby, 1989). Some of my most memorable childhood experiences were in the woods, exploring with friends. I remember hiking through the woods to my grandmother's house. A trip that should have taken me fifteen minutes took an hour because of all the things that I would find to do along the way. I am concerned that type of freedom and exploration has been taken away from my children. I am disappointed that my children had so many man-made

toys that they never had the opportunity to fully experiment with their imaginations. I grew up swimming in a pond that I would consider the ultimate “loose part” (Louv, 2008, p. 89). My kids swim in a perfectly clean, animal free, low adventure swimming pool.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my life and the lives of the kids that I serve, I think it is time to reconnect with nature. I think we may be doing a great disservice to kids to remove them from outdoors and place them in classrooms all day. I believe that, now more than ever, I should look for creative ways to increase what Edward Reed referred to as primary experiences (Louv, 2008). It's time we began to taste, touch, and smell for ourselves, instead of watching it in high definition. As a youth developer, I believe that primary experiences are important to the growth and development of children. Technology continues to place barriers between children and primary experiences. In a society that claims to be the most connected in history, we spend less time communicating in person and more time communicating via applications. Similarly, we spend more time learning about our planet and less time experiencing our planet. I rarely see the excitement that a child shows in nature mirrored in a classroom. All the necessities of life exist in nature. We should connect children to the food they eat. We should surround children with the air they breathe. Research continues to show that there are well-founded reasons to connect kids to nature. I think that learning more about that research and building a greater understanding of why kids need to be connected to nature will help me become a better youth developer for my children and the children that I serve.

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