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I Don't Want My Kids To Have A 'Nature Deficit Disorder'

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Despite our image as a country teeming with nature, we are actually a very urban place. Over 80 per cent of Canadians live in cities

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/big-city-mayors-to-push-federal-parties-for-robust-urban-agendas-1.2945908>), a fact that can actually be good news for the environment. When people live in dense urban clusters

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/density-fosters-sustainability-and-efficiency-says-vancouver-s-former-chief-planner-1.3973391>) they share resources, drive less and have smaller homes.

That said, despite the smaller carbon footprint, city living doesn't feel very green. Sometimes I despair at the fact that my kids don't feel anything but asphalt on their feet for months at a time. Their sensory input comes almost entirely from machines

made by humans: trucks; iPads; garbage compactors.

We get the kids out of the city when we can, but without a car it proves difficult. So on weekends when the weather cooperates, we often find parks and tiny pockets of natural land we can visit to let the kids run wild for a bit. Instead of heading for a play structure, we try and find paths or trails we can follow into the bush. Along the way we've picked up some good tips on maximizing our time in nature with the family.

Winter is long. Here's how a mother throws an epic winter birthday party (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/how-to-have-a-winter-birthday-outdoors-and-have-the-best-time-ever>) — outdoors.

Hunt

Put together a scavenger hunt. I often make this up as I go along, asking the kids to collect five different types of leaves, or three different coloured pebbles.

One summer at the Evergreen Brickworks (<https://www.evergreen.ca/evergreen-brick-works/>) in Toronto, I challenged them to find different types of birds, at least one spider web, a bee pollinating a flower, a turtle and a frog. Extra points if they could find a bush that was exactly their height.

Each hunt will change with the seasons — so change up your lists for spring (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/printable-spring-scamenger-hunt>), summer (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/printable-summer-scamenger-hunt-for-the-senses>), fall (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/printable-autumn-scamenger-hunt>) and winter (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/printable-winter-scamenger-hunt>).

Finding The Perfect Stick

Find the perfect walking stick (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/add-colour-to-your-hike-with-painted-walking-sticks>). For parks with decent trails, as soon as we're hiking, the hunt is on for the perfect "thumbstick," a walking stick with a little 'Y' on the top for your thumb to rest in.

They'll want to bring them home but encourage them to abide by hiker etiquette and leave their sticks at the trailhead for the next person.

Keep An Inventory

Use an app like iNaturalist (<https://www.inaturalist.org/>) to track what you see. If you really can't leave your cellphone at home, take pictures of the living things you see with an app like iNaturalist. The app helps identify the species in your photo with AI image-recognition software. Children can actively contribute to citizen science (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/citizen-science-projects>) projects that

track different species and compare their observations to what others have spotted in the same area. You could also go pen-and-paper with a field book (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/go-on-an-outdoor-expedition-with-a-diy-field-notebook>) to track your findings.

Eat

Make a picnic. There's something about carving up a chunk of cheese with a penknife in the middle of a forest that makes it taste twice as good as it does in the kitchen. If your kids help pack lunch they'll be more excited when the food comes out. Drawback: they'll want to eat as soon as they step on the trail. If you're hiking in the winter, you're going to want to pack a thermos because as much as the kids love cheese, they're going to want something to warm their bodies.

The Starting Point Isn't The Finish Line

Make it a one-way trip. One of the benefits of not having a car is that we don't have to end our walk where we begin. Sometimes we take transit to an entrypoint into a ravine and then travel along a path that takes us to a different transit stop. It's a fun feeling to pop up into the city in a different neighbourhood than where you began.

You Need A Map — Bring One

Bring a map. "I know where I'm going" is pure hubris. Bring a map, even if it's just to show your kids how to read one. Sure, Google Maps has great trails and paths mapped out, but the texture of a paper map somehow feels more appropriate under a tree canopy. Guide books like Shawn Micallef's *Stroll* (<https://chbooks.com/Books/S/Stroll3>) or Richard Louv's *Vitamin N* (<http://richardlouv.com/books/vitamin-n/>) have lots of great trip ideas and games to play.

Make sure there's a treat at the end. Save the announcement of this ultimate goal for that point, just over halfway, when your children's shoulders drop and they start to complain about their feet. The prospect of a delicious treat when they get home is a remarkable incentive to reanimate the weariest of legs.

Read another nature-forward parenting style: I'm Raising My Kids To Play Outside In All Kinds Of Weather (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-im-raising-all-weather-children>)

Just don't plan anything at all. Sometimes when my family heads outside, I get worried that the children will get bored without constant stimulation. This almost never happens. Instead, they soon start poking in the forest around them and invent

their own games. The time-honoured art of peeling bark off a fallen stick can somehow take up hours.

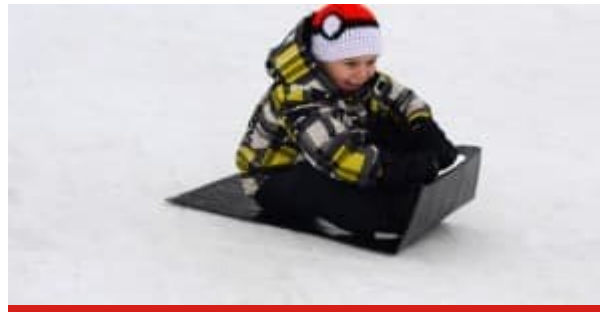
There can be real physical and psychological consequences for humans who lack contact with the natural world. Richard Louv coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to highlight the crisis. There is a paradox in how Canadians live: in cities, environmentally woke, but surrounded by nature some rarely experience.

Our cities have a beguiling array of technological comforts that keep our children stimulated from when they wake until they fall back asleep.

Every now and then we need to pull back the veneer and reconnect them with nature.
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