

Attention Deficit or Nature Deficit Disorder?

Wendy Fidler reports on new research which finds that children as young as five years show a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) when they engage with nature.

'When children come into contact with nature, they reveal their strength'

Maria Montessori

A review of play research, released to mark PlayDay on 2 August 2006, suggests that allowing children to interact with nature will help to achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes.

For example, the 'making a positive contribution' outcome is achieved when children develop an attachment for their local environment and an appreciation of nature.

The authors examined years of academic research into play, child behaviour and natural environments, and established, as Montessorians have always known, that interaction with nature enhances confidence, problem-solving, critical thinking and decision making

Children are biologically predisposed to play; in one study 94% of children



Courtesy of Christopher Jones, Children Now

Allowing children to interact with nature helps to improve outcomes

reported they wanted to play outside a lot more than they are able to do.

The researchers concluded that natural spaces, with plenty of greenery and lots of ways in which children can play, should be a major part of play provision and they called for a UK-wide network of environmental play providers.

One study suggested that children without access to natural play are at risk of nature-deficit disorder, which results in attention difficulties and less developed senses. This confirms what Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Child from Nature Deficit Disorder*, has experienced: ▶

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Universal need for attachment to nature

Richard Louv sends a powerful message about the loss of childhood experience in the natural world. He describes a universal need for attachment to nature and the subsequent personality integration that evolves from outdoor activity – which has been a basic tenet of Maria Montessori's psychology since the beginning of her work one hundred years ago, when many of her classes were held out of doors.

Louv acknowledges that we cannot bring back the 'free-range' childhoods which many of us remember - he recalls feeling the power of the wind while swinging in the branches of trees and the swell of a wave that had 'travelled a thousand miles' before lifting his boat.

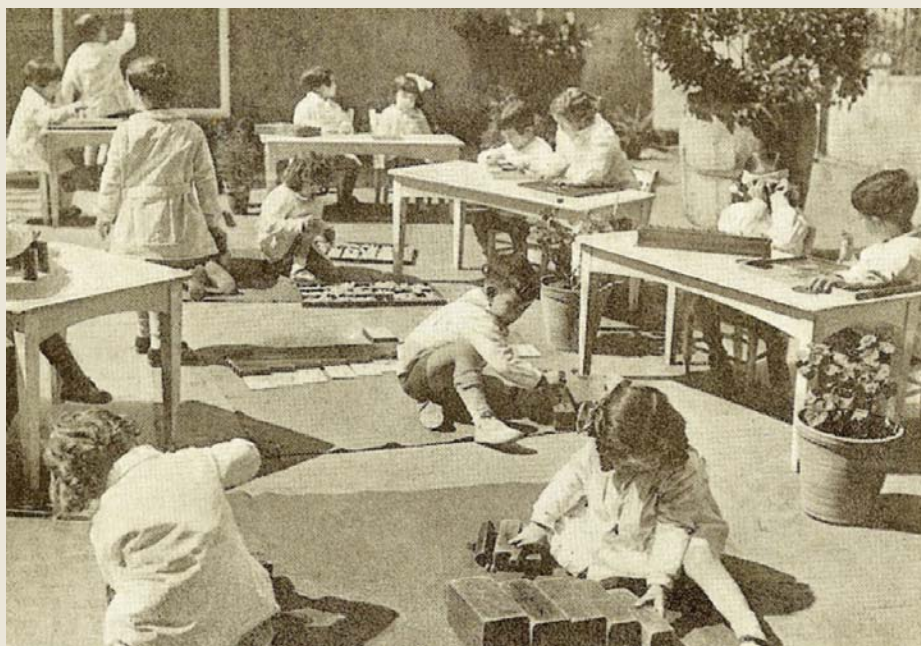
My own four children were 'home-grown' and spent much of their free time exploring Lancashire's lush West Pennine Moors, climbing and mountain biking, or just laying down watching wispy clouds or veils of rain sweep across the distant hills of Derbyshire. Can you imagine how it feels to play a violin on top of a hill? Outdoor school was more often spent on Holcombe Hill than in the garden; we made maps, learned the names of wild flowers, birds and butterflies, picked heather and winberries to take home.

Yes, there were accidents and near misses; all four arrived home visibly shaken one afternoon when the littlest had slipped half way down a ravine in Redisher Woods. But accidents will happen anyway – like the time the same little one slipped between the faulty slats of the changing room benches at the

It's natural! Children prefer mud to sand



Courtesy: Children in Scotland, Carnoustie



Courtesy: Author's own archive

Escola Nacional Montessori. Via Laietana, 59. Exercicis sensorials a ple aire. Many Montessori classes were held outdoors

local swimming baths. He could not be pulled up or squeezed down, and so the local fire brigade had to come and cut him out. Can you imagine? All the commotion, but all he could talk about afterwards was the free ice-cream he'd been given afterwards!

I have found that children who have experienced risk and uncertainty through their interactions with nature are better suited to cope with the idea or concept of risk in other areas of their lives. Furthermore, the fine-honing of their hand to eye coordination and large muscle movements whilst scrambling up hillsides and climbing trees results in increasingly successfully reactions to potential accidents.

There is, Louv says, lasting value in his early 'deliciously idle days'. He came to appreciate the long view afforded from the tree tops. He describes the woods as his Ritalin; nature calmed him, focused him, yet excited his senses.

Born to Move

Things are different these days – parents cite a number of reasons why their children spend less time with nature; disappearing access, television, computer games, traffic, stranger-danger. But there are other more fundamental reasons why children do not choose to play outside; during their earliest years, their natural, instinctive urge to explore through movement has been thwarted.

Parents and carers have come under increasing commercial pressures to confine babies' earliest movements. Cots, play pens, car seats, buggies, baby

walkers all restrict natural phases of movement development; even new born babies can slither if unswaddled.

Conversely, Montessori advocated low, floor-level beds for new-borns who slither and instinctively turn in circles and do not fall. Children naturally tip forward on chairs - it puts them in the right position to strengthen their spines – Montessori offered floor mats as an alternative, and children often prefer to stand at activities.

Arresting children's ability to move and explore has direct links to attitudes to learning, attention, motivation, trial and improvement, communication and coordination. Yes, nature-deficit disorder really does exist, but we must also

Research Report

Play, Naturally: A Review of Children's Natural Play published by the Children's Play Council to mark PlayDay 2006 looks at the benefits of play on children's health and well-being, and outlines what we should be doing to compensate for the loss of natural play space in recent years:

- Natural play reduces attention deficit, raises self-esteem

Natural environment has greater potential for stimuli

- Recommends changes in outdoor playground design
- a UK-wide network of environmental play providers
- www.playday.org.uk/view.asp?ID=51

remember that children are born to move, and that their innate desire to explore, whether indoors or out, can be damaged by confining them in unnatural positions.

The incident of nature-deficit is growing. The Play Council's research shows just how important direct contact with the outdoors and natural play is to healthy human development. We must continue to challenge environmental organisations to preserve the open spaces in our cities,

Born to Move – Absolutely nothing beats music making in the open air



Courtesy: Author's child

and to design and build new kinds of communities, to weave nature-therapy into health care, and nature experiences into our classrooms, in as Maria Montessori called us to do. ■

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Forest Schools originated in Scandinavia in the 1950s as a way of teaching about the natural world. By the 1980s it became an integral part of the Danish early years programme.

In 1995 a group of Nursery Nursing students visiting Denmark witnessed the benefits of Forest School for themselves and brought the idea back to Bridgwater College. Here, lecturers that accompanied the students considered how they could apply what they had seen to the childcare provision in their own Early Excellence Centre. Since then the idea has grown and Forest Schools are spreading throughout England and Wales.

Learning to use sharp instruments such as knives and saws purposefully, under close supervision, lessens the likelihood of misusing these in later years.



Courtesy: Author's child

Children have an innate affinity to care for the natural world

Further Reading

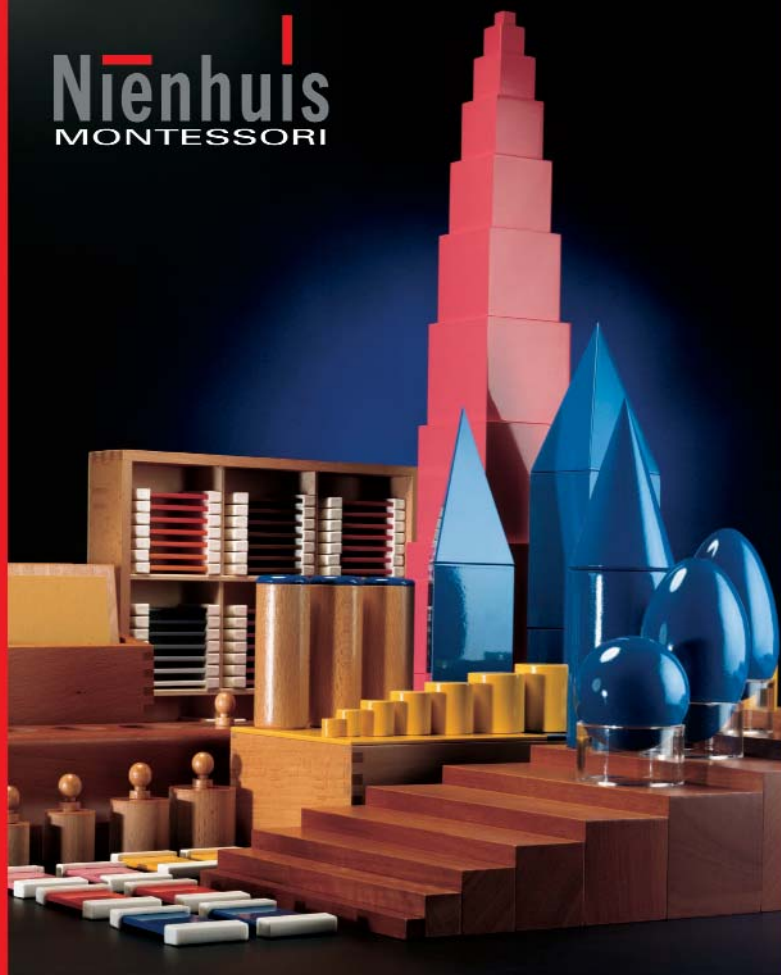
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Richard Louv (2005), *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Child from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill USA

Sarita Goacher (2006), *How do Children Learn to Walk*, Triangle, Issue 20, Montessori Education (UK) Ltd, London www.montessorieducationuk.org

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