



Nature programs' goal: No child left inside

Nationwide movement encourages kids to get out

By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

A back-to-nature movement to reconnect children with the outdoors is burgeoning nationwide.

Programs, public and private, are starting or expanding as research shows kids suffer health problems, including obesity, from too much sedentary time indoors with TV and computers.

"There's a lot of movement all over the country, and it's increasing," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, a 2005 book that has increased interest in the topic. He says studies show that enjoying nature reduces kids' loneliness, depression and attention problems.

In January, the U.S. Forest Service is launching a pilot program, More Kids in the Woods, that will fund local efforts to get children outdoors. It is the service's first full-scale program targeting kids, says Jim Bedwell, national director of recreation and heritage resources.

Also happening:

► A Junior Ranger program, in which kids earn badges by completing activities

Outdoors to indoors

Americans are making fewer visits to national parks as they spend more time using computers, playing video games and watching movies, TV and other media.

Annual per-capita national park visits



Media hours per year



Source: Oliver Pergams, University of Illinois at Chicago

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Programs 'plant seeds'

► New direction on horseback, 6A

at national parks, is opening Friday at Fort Clatsop in Oregon. Nearly 300 national parks have programs for kids 5 and older.

► The National Wildlife Federation is launching "The Green Hour" website in March to give parents fun suggestions for outdoor activities with their children.

► The National Audubon Society, which has opened 30 nature centers in the past decade, will launch a new one this spring in Savannah, N.Y., and has plans for a dozen more in the next few years. Most serve elementary school kids.

► Wonderful Outdoor World, a group that gets public and private funds for programs for disadvantaged urban children, plans to expand its outdoor camping trips beyond its current six metropolitan areas next year.

Connecticut launched a No Child Left Inside program in March with a scavenger hunt in eight state parks that attracted hundreds of families. Texas began a public-awareness push, dubbed Life's Better Outside, last year. Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire signed a bill in March to study how outdoor education affects academic success and personal responsibility.

Nature "touches something very primal in people," Louv says. Adults are quick to reminisce about their childhood treehouses or forts, he says.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne agrees and has been giving speeches on the topic.

"I can still describe to you the rocks, the buttercups and the smell of the pines" of the small forest near his childhood home in Spokane, Wash., he says.

Time in the woods helps children develop bonds with nature and other people, says Gina McCartney, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection.

"We're trying to grow environmental stewards, not just healthy kids."