

The call of the wild



Wendy Ellyatt urges readers to look at practical ways in which they can help children and parents to re-engage with the natural environment

Looking back, it is easy to underestimate just how different the lives of modern children are from those of their parents and grandparents. This difference is, however, fading over time as we now have the first generation of parents who themselves have grown up in the digital world.

Last year, I was at a conference with the risk expert Tim Gill, who said that, for the first time ever, when he asked the audience the question, "Think back to a really magical time in your childhood," it was only those under 25 who didn't relate this to being in nature. This is very worrying, as a lack of connection with the natural environment means that we are less likely to want to value and protect it.

Our children's future

It's not just about protecting nature, though, but also about protecting the health and wellbeing of future generations. Chronic conditions like childhood obesity, asthma and attention-deficit disorder have all increased over the past few decades with outdoor activity taking a back

seat to television, video games, the computer, demanding schoolwork and extra-curricular activities.

English children are spending significantly less time playing in their local neighbourhoods and are, instead, spending an average of five hours a day looking at screens.

Screen technology is, of course, revolutionising how and what we learn, but we know that it is also addictive, particularly for young minds, and that some worrying unintended consequences seem to be occurring in children's motivations and behaviour. One of these is they are now increasingly choosing virtual reality over the sensorial joys of the natural world.

Reconnecting

This year, the Save Childhood Movement is collaborating with the 1,300 member organisations of the newly formed Wild Network to tackle the issue and encourage people to reconnect with the wild. To celebrate National Children's Day UK (NCDUK) on 11 May, we have also teamed up with the American Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood to run a 'Swap screen-

time for wild-time week'.

The idea is to get as many parents, schools and organisations as possible involved in thinking about the issue and finding ways to re-engage both adults and children. What has become clear is that it is all too often adults who are constraining children's freedoms, and that we have a particular problem in England, where so many parents are now working, with little time or energy for family time outside.

Act now

So what can you do? Well there are loads of activities being posted on both websites, and single-site nurseries can be particularly active in engaging parents. The feature documentary Project Wild Thing is now available for screenings, and schools can create their own blogs and Pinterest boards.

We especially love the idea of children being actively involved in talking about the issues, as we need to know what they feel is stopping them from getting outside. We are also really interested in finding outdoor activities for families in towns and cities, as not all children have access to large green spaces.

There is a great booklist now on the NCDUK website; people are actively sharing thoughts and inspirations on our Facebook and Twitter pages; and we hope that, over the next year, we can involve everyone in a national dialogue about why this matters so much. We also hope to create a Children's Outdoor Charter that we can take to Parliament.

So get thinking, share your ideas, and help us all go wild! ■

● To arrange a school film screening of *Project Wild Thing* please go to <https://projectwildthing.com/screenings/arrange>

● Wendy Ellyatt is the founder and chief executive of the Save Childhood Movement, which was established in 2013 to highlight the importance of the early years and to explore what underpins human flourishing.

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