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Growing Up Denatured

By BRADFORD McKEE

WERE it not for the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, Neil Figler said, his sons, 7 and 11, might never peel themselves away from the Xbox to go outside and play.

"My kids want to finish their homework so they can play video games," said Mr. Figler, 47, a salesman and Cubmaster in Goldens Bridge, N.Y. In Scouting his sons have learned to light fires, handle knives and build sleds for trekking through the woods. But even those occasional encounters with nature are planned and supervised by adults.

Nonetheless, the outings seem wilder than most anything else going on in kidland these days. Mr. Figler said his sons find life easier and more familiar in front of a computer screen. Among the Scouts, he said, "that's more the norm than the exception."

The days of free-range childhood seem to be over. And parents can now add a new worry to the list of things that make them feel inept: increasingly their children, as Woody Allen might say, are at two with nature.

Doctors, teachers, therapists and even coaches have been saying for years that children spend too much time staring at video screens, booked up for sports or lessons or sequestered by their parents against the remote threat of abduction.

But a new front is opening in the campaign against children's indolence. Experts are speculating, without empirical evidence, that a variety of cultural pressures have pushed children too far from the natural world. The disconnection bodes ill, they say, both for children and for nature.

The author Richard Louv calls the problem "nature-deficit disorder." He came up with the term, he said, to describe an environmental ennui flowing from children's fixation on artificial entertainment rather than natural wonders. Those who are obsessed with computer games or are driven from sport to sport, he maintains, miss the restorative effects that come with the nimbler bodies, broader minds and sharper senses that are developed during random running-around at the relative edges of civilization.

Parents will probably encounter Mr. Louv in appearances and articles leading up to the publication next month of his seventh book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" (Algonquin Books). The book is an inch-thick caution against raising the fully automated child.

"I worked really hard to make this book not too depressing," Mr. Louv (pronounced "loov") said last week from his home in San Diego. He urges parents to restore childhood to the unplugged state of casual outdoor play that they may remember from their own youth but that few promote in their offspring. "It's society's whole attitude that nature isn't important anymore," said Mr. Louv, 56, who has two sons age 17 and 23.

Dr. Donald Shifrin, a pediatrician in Bellevue, Wash., and a professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of Washington in Seattle, said he sees the signs every day of the syndrome Mr. Louv describes in his book. His patients now arrive with fewer broken arms from falling out of trees (soccer and lacrosse injuries are most common) and more video games, cellphones and hand-held computers.

"We have mobile couch potatoes," Dr. Shifrin said. "The question is, Are we going to turn this around with more opportunities for kids to interact with nature?"

Even if parents think their children get too much screen time and not enough safari time, many have no idea what to do about it. "It's absolutely a phenomenon that nobody knows how to break," said Mark Phillipitch, 40, a manager for a Caterpillar dealer and the father of four

children - 10-year-old triplets (two boys and a girl) and a 6-year-old boy- in Acworth, Ga. "It is stronger than we are."

When Mr. Phillipitch was growing up he and his friends played baseball in a big field. "And if there weren't enough kids, you'd close right field," he said. His own children have bicycles, skateboards and a swing set, he said. But "there's this magnet pulling them into the house." It is the Nintendo GameCube. "I have to throw them outside."

Tracy Herzog, 42, a hospital fitness director and the mother of boys age 7 and 12 in Pembroke Pines, Fla., in effect banishes her children outdoors, she said, by not allowing them near the television, the Game Boy or the PlayStation until after dark. And only if their homework is done.

"As parents we have to make it uncomfortable for them to be sedentary," Ms. Herzog said. "The temptation is to let the TV or PlayStation baby-sit them."

Playing on parental anxieties has become an industry unto itself, but substantive data are almost nonexistent on the presumably growing distance between children and bugs, flowers and seashells. Mr. Louv, who is also a columnist for The San Diego Union-Tribune, has studied the topic as much as anyone. He interviewed about 3,000 children nationwide and many of their parents for his book.

Few if any scientific studies exist showing that children now spend less time exploring nature or describing the ways they benefit from being where the wild things are.

"Who's going to pay for that research?" Mr. Louv asked. "What toy can we sell for natural play?"

Stephen R. Kellert, a professor of social ecology at Yale whose book "Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection" (Island Press) is to be published this summer, said that he had not seen Mr. Louv's book but that ample anecdotal evidence exists to support its argument.

"When you look for the hard data, it's hard to find," Dr. Kellert said. "And people talk about children's contact with nature often in a very indiscriminate way."

Children, he said, experience nature in many settings, often indirectly. If the Internet or television prevents a child from looking for four-leaf clovers, it may also provide vicarious ways to discover Amazonian rain forests. But, he added, the passive watching of a video screen does not simulate the uncertainty and risk, however minor, that make natural exploration bracing.

The risk part, assuming that children do just want to wander or waste time outdoors, is perhaps never low enough for parents.

Tom Cara, 47, who lives in the Chicago suburb of Niles, Ill., said that he and his wife, Erin, take their son, 10, and daughter, 14, on bike trips and that he and his son, in particular, go camping and fishing in the Wisconsin wilderness. But it's hard to let children roam too freely, he said, because the news media have spooked parents with reports of child abductions and murders. "We've been conditioned to live in fear," he said.

That fear resounds for other parents, too. Mr. Figler, the Cubmaster, said that 12 rural acres lie behind his family's home, and that he and his sons often explore them together. But the woods are off limits to his younger son if he is alone. His older son may explore them, but only with a two-way radio. "It's more my wife than me" who worries, Mr. Figler said. But they both grew more concerned after their sons' school notified them that two registered sex offenders live nearby.

"We're in an awareness of safety now that may not have been as prevalent" in the past, Mr. Figler said. "You're always thinking about child abductions. You see the stories on TV, and it gets you nervous."

Like grim news stories, Amber Alerts, broadcast to help spot missing children, may also take a toll on parents' nerves by playing up the risk of criminal harm to their children. Dr. Daniel D. Broughton, a pediatrician

at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and a former chairman of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said he understood the fear that parents have. But he said they need to balance that fear with reality and learn to create safe zones where their children can run around on their own.

"We definitely want kids to be able to go out and play," Dr. Broughton said. "The sedentary lifestyle is a huge problem in my practice every single day. I haven't gone a day where I don't see a kid who's too fat."

Mr. Louv refers to parents' abduction fears as "the bogeyman syndrome." But he suggests that the more likely bogeymen are people who "criminalize" outdoor play through neighborhood associations and their covenants. His own neighborhood's residents' association, he said, is known to go around tearing down tree houses.

"If all these covenants and regulations were enforced, then playing outdoors would be illegal," Mr. Louv said.

And to let a child loiter is almost unthinkable, said Hal Espen, the editor of Outside magazine in Santa Fe, N.M. "The ability to just wander around is a much more fraught and anxiety-prone proposition these days," he said. "There's a lot of social zoning to go along with the urban zoning."

For Ms. Herzog, the fitness director, the local schoolyard has become the latest casualty. It was fenced off recently for security: a "lockdown," she called it. "That doesn't allow active play on the school grounds" during off hours, Ms. Herzog said. "It's not getting any easier."