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Passing on a love of nature to kids

Carol Meyer | Feb. 22, 2011 Eco Catholic

A recent article in USA Today reported that the average American child spends 53 hours a week with electronic media. This alarming statistic means children aren?t getting anywhere near a comparable time outside. But we can be intentional about changing this for the children we influence. I encourage you to make this effort for several reasons: 1) Children need nature to be balanced and whole and we want what is good for them 2) If children know and love nature, they will be more zealous in protecting it 3) Kids have a natural affinity for nature and it brings out their joy and wonder and 4) We want them to know God revealed in creation.

We?ve probably all said to kids, ?Do as I say,? when we weren?t modeling it. Yet we know that never works. Passing on a love of nature has to begin with ourselves. If we are couch potatoes, seldom venturing outdoors, the command to ?Get outside and play? won?t hold much weight. So maybe it?s time to examine our priorities and how much we value the natural world, being out in it, and protecting it. The good news is that if we do, the children around us will probably pick that up naturally.

My granddaughter Taylor, whom I am raising, particularly loves animals. She devours the mail we get from animal rights organizations and is determined to work in this field. She just chose St. Francis of Assisi for her confirmation saint because of his love of animals. This interest did not come in a vacuum. She picked this up from me, without any preaching or effort on my part, because it?s a part of my values and actions.

Lent and Spring are coming, so maybe this would be a good time to discipline yourself and your children to get out in nature more. To me, that seems more valuable and pleasing to God than most of the penances we adopted as children, like giving up candy (which my brothers and I always saved and pigged out on at Easter! Hardly admirable.) Maybe you could even be so bold as to adopt a rule that your kids spend as much time outside as they do watching TV, being on the computer, etc.

It?s a bit ironic that this article is about us passing on a love of nature to children. It seems to me that they are the ones who naturally love it, and we?re the ones gradually stifling it out of them. They can spend hours on the beach examining shells, while we?re the ones who?ve lost that patience and awe. We hurry them on and shuttle them from one activity to another, hardly giving them time to be creative in nature.

As children, my brothers and I were ingenious in coming up with ways to play outside. We pretended, ambled, constructed, luxuriated, scrutinized, roamed, hunted, and delighted. Kids, hungry for nature, just need the opportunity and their creativity will know no bounds. My children were raised in the Kansas City metro area, so it wasn?t quite the same as my idyllic childhood roving the farm. When my son Gabriel was in his early teens, he and a friend found an unusual spot to play in. It was on some public land close to the freeway where a small creek flowed and trash, rocks, and branches abounded. They spent numerous hours interacting with these elements and proudly erecting a shelter out of these unlikely materials.

Sometimes we parents are so protective and worried about accidents, getting dirty, germs, or predators that we think we are doing our kids a favor by constantly keeping them inside. My siblings and I had some mishaps now and then, but it was a small price to pay for the countless hours of joy in nature. We grew strong, resilient, self-

reliant and confident as a result. And if safety is truly a concern where you live, there?s always the back yard, public parks, and outdoor activities that include your participation and watchful eye.

Getting kids to love nature is more than ushering them outside to get them out of your hair. To be effective, it needs to include a variety of elements. Exposing them to nature through books, stories, discussion, the Discovery channel, pets, nature-related toys, and caring for plants can all be done inside your home. But second-hand experience is not enough. You need to take them to nature centers, museums of natural history, Earth fairs, gardening expos, the farmer?s market, and more. And finally, there are the good old direct experiences of camping in a tent, taking family vacations in nature, hiking in the woods, swimming in a lake, and helping with gardening/yard work. In the summer, we always sent our kids to outdoor camps of some kind, which they loved, so don?t forget about that.

And you Dads, this message is for you too. Life is not just about passing on a love of sports to your kids. Your kids will have to deal with the effects of a deteriorating planet, so knowledge of and immersion in nature will give them the tools, inner strength and commitment to deal with these challenges and make a positive difference. And remember that kids will come to know and love God more by sensory, hands-on experiences of God?s creation than all the theory in the world.

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