

Being outside is good for your child's health: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Carroll Ritter
Special to the H-T
12/3/2010

This guest column was written by Carroll Ritter, environmental education coordinator for Sycamore Land Trust.

Most of us remember that special place where we explored as children, whether it was an old building or perhaps a secret hideaway in nature: that old maple with outstretched arms beckoning us to climb a little higher; that nest we made in deep weeds where no one would find us; the bank of the creek, bulwarked by old sycamores and with limestone outcroppings on which we could lie back and soak up morning's incoming rays of sun.

Special places. Images imbedded for a lifetime. Alas, do children today yet experience these life-forming events? We hope so, for this gives us hope for their becoming responsible, caring, committed individuals.

The September 2010 National Wildlife Federation report "Back to School: Back Outside! How Outdoor Education and Outdoor School Time Create High Performance Students" provides some alarming statistics: Kids spend on average seven hours, 38 minutes per day on indoor activities using electronic media, while maybe only minutes outside playing.

Regular outdoor time (to play, explore, create) is on the verge of being a thing of the past for many. The author believes this "indoor childhood" trend is an immense and unnecessary drain on our children's long-term physical, emotional and educational development.

What other "costs" are imputed into the calculus of too much time in the indoor bubble? They include increased childhood obesity, diabetes and asthma, reduced ability to relate to other children and adults, less realistic life expectations, inability to concentrate, more aggressive behavior and a higher likelihood of personal isolation.

Even a child's eyesight and vitamin D levels are affected by too much electronic screen use, the report states. Public health professionals are now saying that today's children may have life spans that are three to five years shorter than their parents' due to their inactive, indoor lifestyles.

Observations by educators at Sycamore Land Trust notice the positive attributes of taking children outside. Their work with some 4,000 kids per year enables them to see the positive attitudes, the glee of exploration, taking of responsibility and appreciation for being in open spaces.

Sycamore Land Trust's mission of helping those who care about setting aside a portion of our natural heritage couples well with guaranteeing the spaces for children of today and tomorrow. The organization's professional and pragmatic approach to landscape protection enables it to work across all types of ownerships and management strategies.

We are doing our part in the "Every Child Outside" push and are optimistic about our children's futures. Let's save those "special places."

Down to Earth welcomes reader submissions of no more than 400 words on topics of interest to the local environmental community. Submissions will be edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, length and good taste. Authors must provide first and last names, as well as relevant affiliations. Submission is no guarantee of publication, and there will be no compensation for articles. Please send contributions to dte@heraldt.com.

Courtesy photo
New Tech High School students use the “ultimate classroom” — the out-of-doors near a Sycamore Land Trust Nature Preserve along Beanblossom Creek.

