



Children in Nature – Reversing the Trend of “Nature Deficit Disorder”: White Paper

By Molly Stevens

Executive Director and CEO, Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center

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The 20th century saw the birth of the conservation movement in the U.S. as hundreds of millions of acres were acquired and protected for their natural resource and outdoor recreation value. Today, even as we have continued to acquire and protect outdoor spaces here in Central Texas, we are seeing a significant shift away from outdoor play, recreation and learning as children have become more urbanized and tethered to technology and the indoor environment. The result is that most children and young adults have a tenuous connection to and understanding of the natural world. There are many vital reasons to advocate for reconnecting our children to nature, but perhaps the most urgent is to safeguard the hard won conservation victories over the last century by ensuring that our community's future voters and policy makers have strong ties to the outdoors.

By the time I was 18 years old, I had caught hundreds of fish, hiked the Porcupine Mountains, canoed and portaged across dozens of Canadian lakes, and spent many nights sleeping under the stars. This time in nature led to a career dedicated to protecting our environment and inspiring others to do the same. Having devoted more than 25 years to environmental protection and education, I am an example for the view that “we protect what we love.”

Of course, I grew up among family and friends who loved being out in nature. Today, few children are so fortunate. Many lack access to nature, adult mentors, and the inspiring experiences that are part of outdoor play and learning. Perhaps the most significant challenge of all is the allure of technology. During the past two decades, childhood has moved indoors. With the average American boy or girl spending upward of 12 hours a day in front of electronic screens, there is an increasing divide between children and nature. This divide is linked to some of our most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rise in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

The good news? Research now shows that kids who spend even a little bit of their day outside in nature are healthier, happier, and perform better academically. And more good news, we are making significant progress toward reversing the trend of indoor and sedentary behavior here in Central Texas.

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At the close of a 2006 Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center board retreat each member was given the book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. It had the desired impact of fueling a strategy to build a collaborative initiative, engaging not just our talented nature, parks and outdoor education colleagues but also health care professionals, landscape architects, community planners, educators, policy makers, business leaders and parents. This group of community leaders has become the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA.)

The Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin is a mighty force for good, catalyzing more than 30 area member non-profits, and another 70 individual members, to work together on common goals related to re-connecting kids to nature. This collaborative model has gained national attention and local recognition.

CiNCA hosts quarterly "socials" for dozens of collaborators around topics of mutual interest such as the health benefits of outdoor play and learning; how educators can integrate nature learning into their curriculum and campus; the important role the faith community can play in getting kids and families out into nature; and how our food sources relate to understanding and enjoying the natural world.

Additionally, CiNCA has mounted several regional projects including:

- 1) creating the Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus to provide needed transportation for schools and families to adventure out into local nature;
- 2) hosting an international Summit on Technology and Nature in an effort to meet kids where they are;
- 3) partnering with area pediatricians to include the importance of outdoor play when visiting with parents and children during annual check-ups;
- 4) launching a Natural Leaders program including a weeklong Legacy Camp to inspire individual action and outdoor leadership among young nature enthusiasts, ages 18 – 29; and
- 5) developing two websites: www.naturerocksAustin.org for finding "nearest nature" and www.greeningyourschoolyard.com to inspire and support regional educators who want to create inviting and safe outdoor spaces on school campuses such as gardens, outdoor classrooms and nature trails.

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Most recently, a unique and far-reaching opportunity has come to the City of Austin to substantially complement the work of CiNCA. In January, the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families and the Children & Nature Network selected Austin to receive a \$25,000 Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) Planning Grant. This planning initiative is designed to engage more deeply with Austin's municipal leadership to chart new pathways to offer children increased connections to nature.

This is a pivotal time for our community and for our children. If we delay taking action we run the risk of losing a generation of youth, soon to be adults, who will not treasure and protect our natural areas. This collaborative is nothing less than a child-saving campaign to get kids, and their families, out into nature both for their benefit and for that of the conservation movement.

9 Things You Can Do to Help Reverse the Trend of Nature Deficit Disorder:

1. Share this White Paper with other parents, educators, community leaders and health care professionals.
2. Ask for a spot on the agenda of your next school PTA or CAC meeting and invite a speaker from CiNCA to give a short talk about the benefits of outdoor play and learning.
3. Schedule an "Adventure Speaker" to attend an assembly of students to show-and-tell about a cool outdoor experience (i.e.: climbing the Grand Tetons; paddling the Rio Grande through Big Bend).
4. Send a link to www.greeningyourschoolyard.com to all the teachers in your life.
5. Join CiNCA (\$100 per organization; \$25 per person) and attend our next CiNCA Social (see www.westcave.org for the 2016 calendar and member sign-up).
6. Invite the Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus to stop at your church, mosque or synagogue after worship to pick up 20 families to go somewhere fun for an outdoor adventure.
7. Go out into your own backyard / schoolyard and see how many critters you can find and repeat your search for each season.
8. Volunteer your time, talent, and treasure to CiNCA or to one of our member organizations.
9. Visit www.naturerocks.org and plan a local adventure with at least one child in your life.

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Molly Stevens is the CEO and Executive Director of Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center (WODC) in Central Texas and is the co-founder of the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA). Prior to WODC, she spent 12 years with the EDF Texas Regional Office and 3 years with the Nature Conservancy of Texas. Molly is a Board Member and Chair of the Governance Committee of the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA). She also serves as Chair of Families in Nature.

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