

THE ISSUE: 'BE OUTDOORS ARIZONA' PROGRAM

A PROMISING WAY TO RECONNECT KIDS AND NATURE

Turning a tree into a fort. Catching strange bugs. Collecting shiny rocks that just might be gold.

The memories come rushing back when we think about playing outside as children.

Will today's kids, brought up on electronics and heavily scheduled activities, have any stories about being out in nature?

It's up to us to make sure they do.

A great starting point is a state-wide effort called Be Outdoors Arizona, which is just gaining momentum. Organized as a non-profit, it brings together a wide range of groups involved in nature-oriented programs.

The aim is to coordinate, avoid duplication, develop new ideas, share best practices and get out the word about what's available.

In Phoenix, the Nina Mason Pulliam Rio Salado Audubon Center has a "nature quest" activity: Visitors get a paper with a set of rhymed riddles, which take them to various places at the nature center. Other places around the state will develop their own nature quests, and it will all be posted at www.beoutdoorsarizona.org (still in its initial stages).

The site will include ideas for families. A plus for parents is that so much outdoor recreation is inexpensive or free. Take a walk in the evening and look at stars. Go on a picnic in a mountain park and let the kids run around.

But "it's not just running around and hugging trees," explains Jeff Williamson, president

of the Arizona Zoological Society, which runs the Phoenix Zoo. He envisions getting young people involved in restoring wildlife habitat and planting local gardens.

Author Richard Louv put a spotlight on the disconnect between kids and nature in his 2005 bestseller "Last Child in the Woods." Valley Forward Association recently brought him to Phoenix to talk about solving the "nature deficit disorder."

A major challenge, he points out, is "stranger danger." Parents are no longer comfortable letting their children roam the neighborhood or even walk to school. So we're forced into a contradiction: Structuring opportunities for kids to have unstructured time outside.

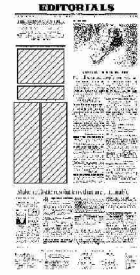


Richard Louv

Louv sees a role for technology in hooking kids on nature. In geocaching, for instance, players use GPS devices to track down containers hidden outdoors. Kids can use digital cameras to capture natural images.

Whatever way we can do it, getting kids outdoors pays off in all kinds of ways: reducing obesity, fostering creativity, stimulating problem-solving, promoting community stewardship and building a connection to nature.

Be Outdoors Arizona can be a powerful way to reconnect children with our natural wonderland. It deserves support and participation.





FILE PHOTO BY MICHAEL CHOW/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Getting kids to play outdoors reduces obesity, fosters creativity, stimulates problem-solving and builds a connection to nature.