

**You Can Reconnect Kids to Nature**  
**Coloradoan Open Space Column**  
**November 25, 2009**

Have you noticed that nature play has almost disappeared from childhood? Finding shapes in the clouds, exploring streams and puddles, chasing fireflies or frogs and “mucking around” in nature used to be a big part of being a kid.

Today, unstructured outdoor time for kids is rare. Free-time for children has been replaced by longer school days and structured after-school activities. Parents are afraid of child-abduction. In fact, children aged 3-12 spend just 1% of their time outdoors, and 27% of their time with electronic media such as computers, video games and television (*Changes in American Children's Time, 1981-1997*, Hoffereth and Sandberg, 1999). These trends are a problem according to Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, 2005.

Louv cites increases in obesity, attention deficit disorder and stress as consequences of reduced nature play. At the same time, volumes of research show that children are smarter, more cooperative, happier and healthier when they have frequent and varied opportunities for unstructured play in the outdoors.

You can be part of the trend to reconnect children to nature. Start with [www.greenhearts.org](http://www.greenhearts.org)'s three keys for great nature play:

- **The right kind of place.** Choose a place that looks wild to a child's eyes. It can be a small area, because it is not the size that is important, it's the freedom to explore. Try a corner of your yard, a vacant lot or an off-trail natural area.
- **The right kind of play.** Let children direct the play with nature, not in nature. Encourage building snow sculptures, searching for insects, climbing trees, hiding in tall grass and open-ended imaginative play.
- **Don't forget to re-play.** Make nature play part of the regular rhythm of life. Kids should play outside nearly every day, again and again, in all types of weather.

Consider your own yard as a great nature play area – one you can supervise from the edge or even from the house. You can create small nooks with shrubs, vine tepees and narrow paths. Try installing a “discovery board” a two-foot square piece of plywood set on the ground that will attract worms, pill bugs, ants, slugs and more. Consider a dirt or rock pile for climbing/moving/digging and a construction zone with fort building materials.

Nature clubs for families are another fun way to reconnect kids to nature. Easy, free “toolkits” for starting a nature club can be found at [www.naturerocks.org](http://www.naturerocks.org) and [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org).

As you help connect youngsters to nature, you may find yourself connecting with your kids in new ways. Try to see the world through the eyes of children and enjoy the journey together.

Go out, go out I beg of you  
And taste the beauty of the wild.  
Behold the miracle of the earth  
With all the wonder of a child. -*Edna Jaques*

Zoe Whyman is the Community Relations Manager for the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program, and a member of the Children and Nature Connection-Northern Colorado, 970-221-6311, [zwhyman@fcgov.com](mailto:zwhyman@fcgov.com)