

Playing in the Real World

Most parents desire the best education for their children but in reaching for that, many over-schedule their kids, leaving them little time for play or outdoor recreation outside of a formal athletic environment. And when kids do have downtime, all too often it's spent plugged into a device of some kind.

For the first time in history, most of the world's population live in an urban area. Researchers have been examining the matter, and the outcome as they say, is chastening. Simply put, our brains suffer if we don't get enough nature. Perhaps worse, the spirit suffers as well. Hospital patients have been proven to heal more quickly if they have a tree outside their window, or if they spend time in a garden. Likewise, an important part of a quality education for a child is cradled in time enjoyed not just out of school, but also out of doors. Children who spend more time playing outdoors show greater creativity and imagination, ironically, than their counterparts who are continuously plugged in to an imaginary world.

Memories

An important facet of outdoor play is that it creates long-lasting memories. These are cherished and passed down as a heritage, from generation to generation. Would you prefer to tell your grandchild about the first tree house you built, or your best Wii score? Did your father tell you about his favorite fishing hole or his favorite type of cell phone? Heritage very often, is built upon outdoor childhood memories and we can't afford to lose that trend. The most important gifts are invariably the least expensive and introducing a child to exploration of the natural world could be one of the best you ever give. Hidden Corner is a program that incorporates environmental education and outdoor recreation, but to paint the big picture we want to say that we are now talking about something as simple as time spent in your yard, in the park near you, or in the container garden on your apartment balcony. A cheap pair of binoculars and a bird walk can influence a child for life.

Play

While Hidden Corner offers an organized range of activities, you will notice that many of the trail guides end with these words, "Allow time for unstructured play." Structure has its place but it cannot be at the cost of all free and spontaneous play. None of the Hidden Corner trails or lessons would quite achieve their mark if kids lacked time to unwind and run free. It's the time spent playing in the creek at the end of a hike that makes them want to come back again. Goofing around on the beach in the evening is made possible by a kayak trip, and they will realize this as the evening comes to a close.

Very often it's during this play period that they develop the skills of leadership and conflict resolution. Play allows the brain time to process the day's information, and most importantly it's a time when the child develops habits of the mind, heart, and soul – thinking, creativity, loving, and learning. Perhaps one of the saddest symptoms of an urban society is that kids are beginning to think it *uncool* to play.