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LEAVE NO CHILD INSIDE: HOW TO REALLY MAKE THE ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGE WORK

February 27, 2009 – What if we could improve children’s health, reduce crime, and build a smarter workforce simply by fully funding parks and recreation at every level of government? Sound crazy? Maybe. But sometimes we miss a simple solution when it is staring us in the face.

We all know that children’s chronic health issues – obesity, ADHD, heart issues, diabetes – are becoming an increasing problem - so much so that Robert Wood Johnson researchers report that the U.S. has the potential of raising the first generation of children to have a shorter lifespan than their parents. In that stark analysis are these facts;

- Obesity in children increased from about 4 percent in the 1960s to close to 20 percent in 2004.
- ADHD diagnoses increased by 33% between 1997 and 2002.

We also know that kids (and adults) are spending less and less time outdoors.

In one of my favorite cartoons, Calvin says to Hobbes, “Look! A trickle of water running through some dirt! I’d say our afternoon just got booked solid.” Researchers call this “unstructured nature play.” And it is becoming more and more a piece of history. Most of us Baby Boomers grew up playing outside. I’d leave the house in the morning with my brother and sisters and tell my mother, “I’ll be somewhere around the circle or I might be in the woods.” In the woods there were beech trees to climb and boulders that all had names – Clam Rock, Ship Rock, Bed Rock. We’d always come back for meals and my mother would never worry.

But my kids don’t have that – fewer and fewer do – a trend Richard Louv identifies in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, as “nature deficit disorder.”

Just a few statistics bear this out:

- Children today spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation.
- Children spend more of their diminishing free time in structured activities: children’s discretionary time (i.e., time not spent in school, child care, etc.) declined 12% (7.4 hours a week) from 1981 to 1997 and an additional 4% (2 hours) from 1997 to 2002/3;
- Families have less leisure time and are spending more of it indoors. Since 1988, per capita visits to U.S. national parks have declined by about 20%.
- Americans spend 170 minutes a day watching TV and movies, 9 times as much as they do on physical activities Children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day with electronic media!

- A British study found that children can identify 25 percent more Pokemon characters than wildlife species at eight years old.

Louv maintains that this is not just an issue of environmental concern, i.e, that we're raising a generation of kids who won't value nature or vote for nature – but it is also a concern for children's emotional, intellectual and physical well-being. Louv cites a growing body of research that tells us this is a problem. Research now shows a positive correlation between contact with nature and children's physical, behavioral, emotional and intellectual development.

Dr. Stephen R. Kellert of Yale University writes, "Play in nature, particularly during the critical period of middle childhood, appears to be an especially important time for developing the capacities for creativity, problem-solving, and emotional and intellectual development." Other research has found that:

- The greener a child's everyday environment, the more manageable are their symptoms of attention-deficit disorder.
- Access to green spaces for play, and even a view of green settings, enhances peace, self-control and self-discipline within inner city youth, and particularly in girls.

Direct experience in nature is diminishing. This trend coincides with huge increases in obesity, and diagnoses of ADHD and childhood depression. Perhaps the most useful "economic stimulus" plan with the greatest impact on health care, the economy and the environment, would be one that invests in Frick Park and Nine Mile Run, the Allegheny National Forest and Presque Isle State Park, for example. We know Congress is paying attention. Last year, the House passed the No Child Left Inside Act and the Senate will be considering the bill this session.

In the meantime, imagine a world with healthier, happier, more productive kids. Take a child outside to play in a natural area and see what happens.

Janet Milkman is President of EARTHNEXT, a Pennsylvania-based non-profit organization working to connect children and youth to nature through programs for children and youth organizations. www.earthnext.org.

All the sources and citations for the data are available if needed.

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About EARTHNEXT

ERTHNEXT is a national non-profit organization working to protect the future on earth for all species through programs that help children and youth learn about and protect the environment. EARTHNEXT provides fun, science-based, outdoor-oriented and hands-on environmental programs for children and youth organizations, schools, and families. Through national and local partnerships with Girl Scouts of the USA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and others, EARTHNEXT aims to help create a generation of environmental stewards. EARTHNEXT's flagship program, **Trees for the 21st Century**, is a unique educational and tree-planting program for children ages 6 to 18, involving science-based learning, tree-planting, and ongoing stewardship activities. www.earthnext.org