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Making the most of Nature: 3 simple rules to remember

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT

Over the years, I have developed three basic rules for exploring nature.

Nature is nearby all of us, in backyards, sidewalk cracks, puddles, schoolyards and the Portage Park District, so it is never hard to find. It is also good to know that you don't have to spend any money on fancy equipment or expensive admission fees to enjoy it.

Rule #1: Make time for dirt

Dedicating time to spend outdoors is a challenging aspect to exploring the outdoors. When was the last time you lay in the cool grass on your back to "cloud watch"? Or took a "puddle walk" in the rain?

It takes time to splash, fly kites, and catch fireflies. Your job, the dirty dishes, soccer games, and mowing the lawn all get in the way of enjoying the outdoors. Studies show, though, that in order for people to develop a connection with nature, they need frequent opportunities as a child to be outdoors, and they need an adult with which to enjoy the experiences.

Take time with your child to climb trees, splash rocks in the water at Seneca Ponds and walk in the warm rain. These are healthy, learning experiences that don't require a container of hand sanitizer in your back pocket. Parents don't think anything of letting their kids get dirty playing sports. Why should it be different if they walk in a stream or build a fort in the woods? Dirt washes off of hands and knees as easily as it washes off of baseball pants and soccer socks.

Rule #2: Pull the plug

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation suggests kids and teens spend nearly six hours a day in front of a screen (TV, computer, video game) outside of schoolwork. Young children are not immune. Two-thirds of infants and toddlers watch a screen an average of two hours a day.

All this technology presents a problem to spending time outside. Children (and adults, too!) need encouragement to break away from the power

GREEN PORTAGE

Matt Sorrick



cords that bind us to electrical sockets, and to get outdoors.

The typical child spends barely one-half hour outside each day. That is hardly enough time to run in the sprinkler, take a butterfly walk at Dix Park, read a book in the shade, plant carrots or bike on the Portage Connector. Pull the plug on electric entertainment and go outside for some real world experiences.

Rule #3: Stop! Look, listen, smell, touch!

If you really want to find a way to re-connect with nature, go outside with a child. Children have a natural sense of wonder that is a vital part of who they are, and how they learn.

Children use their senses and inborn curiosity to explore their world, and often their entire bodies become part of the exploration. As we get older, the fascination and wonder of closely observing nature wanes, and we become much more concerned about purpose for our time.

Rather than strapping on the running shoes or hopping on the bike for exercise, just take a walk with your child (leave the iPod behind, of course). Pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and head out the backdoor or to Townner's Woods. A stick, some stones and a mud puddle is more than enough for an exploration.

The fresh air and exercise does a body good, and it is a whole lot more enjoyable for you and your child than an hour on the treadmill.

Matt Sorrick is director of the Center for Science Education at Hiram College. He provides programs to explore nature at the Hiram College Field Station, neighborhoods, and other nearby parks and preserves. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier.