



# PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL PARENTS

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## Biophilia

“ As the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of human experience. Yet, at the very moment that bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a growing body of research links our mental, physical and spiritual health directly to our association with nature – in positive ways...Reducing that deficit – healing the broken bond between our young and nature – is in our self interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depends upon it. ”

-Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2008)

Teaching our children about the environment has become the norm. Most, if not all early elementary classrooms include lessons that highlight the importance of using natural resources responsibly and of protecting and preserving other animal and plant species. While few would disagree that environmental stewardship is a critical 21<sup>st</sup> century skill, showing first graders pictures of endangered species from the rapidly diminishing rainforests may not be sound pedagogy. Plus, approaching young children about nature conceptually, within the walls of home or classroom, is akin to lecturing kids about how to ride a bicycle, and equally unsatisfying.

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## *“Biophilia” continued*

Researchers have long recognized in the scientific literature what any parent of a four-year-old knows: very young children are predisposed to explore and bond with the natural world. The naturalist E.O. Wilson is credited with coining the term “biophilia” to describe humanity’s innate love for the natural world. Wilson advocated for “moral reasoning of a new and more powerful kind,” noting that “we are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms,” and adding that “To the extent that each person can feel like a naturalist, the old excitement of the untrammelled world will be regained.”

While parents and teachers may see nature as a backdrop, children regard the neighborhood park or open field as an experiential component of their activities. To children, nature is to be interacted with physically – to be touched, tasted, smelled, heard, and seen up close, not merely appreciated from a distance or in a glossy picture in National Geographic.

According to Randy White and Vicki L. Stoecklin (“Nurturing Children’s Biophilia: Developmentally Appropriate Environmental Education for Young Children”), “Recent research strongly suggests that the opportunity for children younger than age 11 to explore in wild, natural environments is especially important” and that “the best learning environments are informal and naturalistic...where children have unmediated opportunities for adventure and self-initiated play, exploration and discovery.” In fact, White and Stoecklin contend, “Teaching children at too early of an age about abstract concepts like rainforest destruction, acid rain, ozone holes and whale hunting can lead to disassociation from nature...When we ask (very young) children to deal with problems beyond their cognitive abilities, understanding and control, they can become anxious...”

In short, don’t expect kids who live in the temperate zone to develop empathy for the natural world by telling them about the plight of polar bears on melting ice caps. Instead, take them outside, to the park, lake, river, or forest, and let them interact, as appropriate, with indigenous animals.

While just getting outside regularly is less and less a part of a child’s typical day, doing so confers many benefits.

According to the National Wildlife Federation’s report, “Whole Child: Developing Mind, Body and Spirit Through Outdoor Play,” part of the “Be Out There” campaign:

- Outdoor time has a dramatic impact on children’s attentiveness and school preparedness. Children who spend time outdoors, whether through walking or biking to school, or playing or learning outside, score higher on a wide range of tests of their academic ability and performance.
- Children who spend time outdoors learn to work as a team and are better problem solvers as adults.
- Excessive media consumption contributes to a reduction in happiness for today’s children. Replacing connectedness to self, friends and the natural world with the pseudo-connectedness of the online world doesn’t work. Nature offers opportunities to decompress, reduces stress and improve relationships, helping kids feel lighter and happier.
- Whether for building a fort out of twigs, creating a fairy forest or pretending to be a superhero, playing outside inspires, and requires, an active imagination.
- When kids play outside, they are more likely to follow parents’ admonition to “play nice.” Being outdoors helps create compassion and improves social bonds. ■

## **Parenting for Moral Growth**

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# Putting Camp In the Childhood Equation

*Including Excerpts from Camping Magazine*



“But things have changed so much since I was a kid!”

While not a new sentiment, today’s parents have ample cause to lament the huge shifts in the cultural landscape that have occurred in the span of time that separates their own childhood from that of their children. Consider that many 10 year-olds have never known homes without personal computers to access the Internet, or cars without talking GPS systems and individual movie screens.

One of the few consistent traditions of childhood, a milieu largely unchanged since Mom and Dad were young, is the traditional overnight summer camp.

But when it comes to summer camp, families today have an array of options. Along with the familiar, two- to three-week model – days spent savoring the lake or the woods, playing games or doing arts and crafts, nights spent singing around a campfire, gazing at the stars and giggling with bunkmates in rustic cabins – highly regimented specialty day camps intended to hone particular skills are increasingly available. “Campers” might spend their time developing specific athletic abilities, perfecting musical talents, or even taking practice SAT tests. Unlike the “pack-the-duffel-bag-and-get-on-the-bus” summer camp, these experiences are about raising individual achievement, not about journeying with others to a removed, natural setting to practice building a community.

The website for the Timber Top Camp/Hampshire Country School ([www.hampshirecountryschool.org](http://www.hampshirecountryschool.org)) eloquently makes the case for choosing the more traditional approach, one that fosters character:

*Camp is a very powerful experience for all children and adolescents. It is often the first, and sometimes the only, place where they can act independently in a world which is manageable for them. Camp means learning to live around others, being part of a community, and feeling how that is rewarding and*

*challenging at the same time. Camp offers children and adolescents a chance to make friends, gain self-confidence, and learn how to solve problems on their own. Camp is also the place to reinvent oneself.*

The “power” of the traditional camp experience is derived in large part from the transformative potential of separation. For families who have always been virtually connected by cell phone, the notion of an extended period without physical or digital contact may be both alluring and alarming, for both parent and child.

“ Kids gain confidence and increased resilience when they discover that a new adventure or accomplishment can quickly dispel an unhappy or apprehensive mood. ”

Facing a new experience with a mixture of excitement and trepidation is a natural response for kids and adults. For a child at camp to miss home and feel momentarily sad is both predictable and appropriate. Recognizing that such feelings may be intense, but are also transitory, is critical. Kids gain confidence and increased resilience when they discover that a new

adventure or accomplishment can quickly dispel an unhappy or apprehensive mood.

Parents can use several strategies to allay a child’s separation anxiety prior to leaving for camp:

- Calmly discuss your child’s concerns. Talking about homesickness in advance does not increase the likelihood of experiencing it. Focus on positive coping strategies. (“Remember the first time you stayed overnight at Sara’s house you were a little nervous but you had so much fun?” “You’ve always

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## ***“Camp” continued***

been good at making new friends at school.” “The counselors like working with kids and have lots of experience.” “The adults at camp will know how to be in contact if something were to happen and you needed us.”)

- Be sure your child is well informed about what to expect at camp. Involve your child in the process of preparing for specific activities and packing camp gear.
- Rehearse with your child proactive behaviors to help create a positive experience. (“If something bothers you, what might you say to your cabin leader?” “What will you do if the counselor asks for volunteers to help with chores?” “How will you introduce yourself to the other kids in your cabin?”)
- Discuss the camp policy about communication. Remind your child of scheduled times for visits with family or phone calls home. Pick out stationery to pre-stamp and address, and let your child know how excited you will be to receive letters.

But what if it’s the parent who is experiencing anxiety over separation? According Dr. Michael Thompson, psychologist, school consultant, and author of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, “Many parents who have unprecedented levels of control over and contact with their children are finding themselves with a serious case of ‘child-sickness’” when their children go away to camp. But reflecting on one’s own fondest memories of childhood can be instructive. From years of polling his own audiences, Dr. Thompson has learned that many people vividly recall moments that really belonged to them, moments without parents hovering over them. He adds, “It’s almost the definition of camp, isn’t it?”

In a joint interview conducted in 2010 by the American Camp Association (ACA), Dr. Thompson’s insight was echoed by Rachel Simmons, author, educator, and founder of The Girls Leadership Institute (GLI). She noted, “I think summer camp is one of the last refuges where you can really fend for yourself and grow unfettered for a while...If you’re caught in a bad relationship [at school], for example, it’s hard to believe that can change. Camp offers new relationship possibilities...Camp often helps children understand what a better friendship feels like.”

Thompson and Simmons also point to the unique power and opportunity for younger children to form trusting relationships with and be positively influenced by the young adults who often act as camp counselors. These camper/counselor relationships are based not on achievement, but on building camp community. And the mix of ages and developmental levels at camp, unlike school, fosters growth as well. Says Thompson, “Our schools are so age segregated that kids don’t get to compare up or down. A younger boy may not have a clue what they’re doing in seventh grade, but at camp they can see what everyone is doing, the whole range of development. It gives them targets to shoot for.”

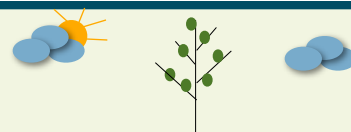
Parents should consider the many benefits of the intentional, carefully orchestrated separation that allows their children to participate in constructing the “home away from home” of the traditional summer camp. They can delight in anticipating their child’s experience of what Thompson describes as “fantastic lost world of family traditions”:

A world where people sit down and eat three meals together every day, serving their food from platters and talking with one another throughout the meal. A world where ten-year-olds set the table for dinner and take all the dishes back to the kitchen when the meal is finished, without complaint. A world where thirteen-year-old boys don’t play video games every night, nor do they watch t.v. or sit in front of computers. Instead, they lie on their beds and read comic books and graphic novels, sometimes even grown-up novels. In this world I saw eleven-year-old girls walking together and holding hands as they walked back to their cabins. Right out in the open. No girls there send mean instant messages to one another; they don’t I.M. at all. Instead, they sing. When they are making their beds (yes, they make their beds every morning) and sweeping out their rooms, they sing together. First one starts to sing a song, and then the others join in, spontaneously. There is no adult leading them. ■

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Excerpts taken from “Putting camp in the childhood equation: A conversation with Rachel Simmons and Michael Thompson,” originally published in the 2010 May/June issue of *Camping Magazine*. Reprinted by permission of the American Camp Association. ©2010 American Camping Association, Inc.

# Children in Nature



“Great things happen when youth and mountains meet.”

Those are the words spoken by Frank H. Cheley in the early 1920’s when he founded his summer camp for boys and girls, Cheley Colorado Camps, which still – after over 90 years – nurtures character development through outdoor experiences for youth in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

More recently, the Children and Nature Network<sup>1</sup> and its off-shoot movement, No Child Left Inside, carry the torch for the importance of reconnecting children to nature, the launch of which is found in Richard Louv’s groundbreaking book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.*<sup>2</sup> Louv convincingly outlines the researched argument that children need to connect with nature through play and exploration to maintain their physical health, “for the healthy development of their senses, and, therefore, for learning and creativity,”<sup>3</sup> and he presents a case for experience in nature as a therapy for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). “In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace.”<sup>4</sup> Great things.

By age eight every summer my mom and my aunt loaded two station-wagons with me, my three siblings, and three cousins, and drove us on the overnight trip through the panhandle of Texas to Colorado with no iPods, iPads, or DVDs to keep us company or to keep us in line. We weren’t always happy (we were, of course, kids stranded in a crowded hot car, arguing over who had to sit in the “way back”), but even on a road trip we experienced place and knew where we came from: we stopped at rest-stops for picnics under the hot Texas sun, spotted hawks and their nests on the tops of telephone poles, marveled at the number of cows and Bluebonnets that lined the road,

“ While in the car, we looked out the window for hours on end, and we saw and experienced the passing world at eye level. ”

wondered at how big the sky was, and, if we were really lucky, experienced the excitement of a north Texas thunder and lightening storm that sometimes was so heavy and dark it slowed us to a stop on the side of the road. While in the car, we looked out the window for hours on end, and we saw and experienced the passing world at eye level.

And that was just the car ride. Once we got to Colorado, we were equally as engaged. I couldn’t tell you what the inside of our rented cabin looked like after staying there for several summers, but I could tell you in detail the difference between a chipmunk and a ground squirrel, warn you of “camp robbers” (aka Gray Jays) and the dangers (to us and to them) of feeding wild animals, show you how to stay very, very still to get a hummingbird to perch on your finger at the feeder, identify Columbines and Indian Paintbrush (“Hey, we have those in Texas too!”), and justify snow in the mountains in summer. Nature engaged me, entertained me, scared and challenged me, made me uncomfortable, filled me with wonder, and at the same time gave me joy and solace. These are the wonders of childhood, and they inform the questions we ask in adolescence as we try to make sense of our place in this world and what our role is in it. Ultimately as adults these qualities and experiences underpin our evolving view of the world: spiritual, philosophical, academic.

Louv’s 21st chapter, “Spiritual Necessity of Nature for the Young,” opens with this: “When my son Matthew was four, he asked me, ‘Are God and Mother Nature married, or just good friends?’ Good question.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*, also opens with critical observation about the differences between child and adult experience of the world:

Too often I’ve assumed that the kids and I agree on all there is to know about the places where we routinely eat, wash, and sleep, as if they and I occupy and make sense out of the same familiar world.

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We do not.

We sooner or later realize how differently each of us moves through any terrain. Going out together to discover new places is the surest way to be reminded that we do not see the land with the same eyes, nor smell it with the same nose. It sings different songs to each of us, and what we hear changes in accordance with our years.<sup>6</sup>

The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is said to have found enlightenment after long meditation under the Bhodi Tree, a sacred fig tree. The genesis of Judeo Christian Tradition is in the Garden of Eden and Jesus was born in a barn amongst the animals. Even Jesus, as Barbara Brown Taylor notes, lived in tents rather than houses for most of his adult life (as a backpacker and trekker, I love this idea), met with crowds in open fields, by riverbanks, and on tops of mountains, was baptized in a river, and spent time in the desert for 40 days to reflect on his life’s journey and resist temptation.

Without fail, one of the best conversations I ever had with a group of students in my 18 years of teaching was around a picnic table in a state park in Utah, the desert wind blustering around us. We had just completed a four-day river trip, the only bathing we had done were swims in the Green River, and we were just sitting around “chewing the fat” after dinner and before our tired drive back to Albuquerque the next day. With no TVs, iPods, or other electronic distractions for five days we had gotten very good at the after-dinner conversation. We had learned to talk and listen, to ask questions, and to trust one another. As a life-long outdoor educator, I knew that much of that group quality might disappear as soon as we arrived back at school (they were teenagers and school mates, after all), but it was genuine in that moment. It turns out, we had among us a cross-section of religious and spiritual beliefs and we found ourselves talking with one another – I in a group of 10<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls – about our individual concepts of heaven. Native American, Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish were all represented, and rather than arguing or convincing, we were curious and found ourselves in a unique environment to ask questions and to share. I still keep in touch with many of those students (thanks Facebook!) even as they have moved on through college and graduate school, and we continue to have those

conversations, formed around that first wilderness experience together.

Any outdoor educator would tell you what Frank Cheley said so many years ago, that “Great things happen when

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We had learned to  
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youth and mountains meet,” or the revised version, that something wonderful and deep can happen when youth experience nature and are allowed genuine exploration – the asking of questions, the touching and feeling of

the world. For me, I have sought and found spiritual solace in what I call the greatest cathedrals on earth – the highest mountains. I go to the mountains – to nature – to re-charge, to connect, to relax, and to play.

The people of God are not the only creatures capable of praising God, after all. There are also wolves and seals. There are also geese and humpback whales. According to the Bible, even the trees can clap their hands.<sup>7</sup> ■

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