

Education

Seeking a new connection to nature for children through the Unplugged Learning Project

by Natalie K. Pollock

Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best: "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life, no disgrace, no calamity ... which nature cannot repair."

According to some residents, this town has deprived its children of the opportunity to appreciate the joys of nature and the contributions communing with it can make to their education and self-awareness. So some members of the Avon Land Trust have interested the schools in working together to bring nature back into the curriculum and students back into nature.

The Unplugged Learning Project, headed by Susan Rietano Davey and Chris Gackstatter of the land trust, and Larry Sparks, assistant principal of Roaring Brook School, is being launched with a community reading event. Co-sponsored by the Avon Free Public Library, all residents are invited to read "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" by Richard Louv.

Mr. Louv, a former columnist for the San Diego Union-Tribune, examines the relationship between children and nature through the years. He theorizes that a childhood devoid of interaction with nature has unhealthy individual and social consequences, including obesity, attention deficit disorders, lack of creativity and depression. He has been credited with fostering an international movement to reintroduce children to the natural world.

"The Unplugged Learning Project is a land trust initiative. We are one of the large land owners in town and we would like to see our land put to use," said Mr. Gackstatter, land trust vice president and owner of his own business, which manufactures and markets children's toys.

"We don't want them thinking, if it is preserved, then we do not touch it. We want people to interact with it so that they have an appreciation of open space."

He remembers growing up in a suburban town similar to this one and spending most of his youth in the woods, riding bikes on a trail along a river and building forts with friends. These days his children, who are 10 and 12 years old and attend schools in town, are always complaining, along with their friends, about being bored.

"Kids today do not have access to woods and open spaces, or our society has distracted and discouraged them from using their time outdoors," said Mr. Gackstatter.

Last September, the No Child Left Inside bill was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and is awaiting approval by the Senate. The measure creates a new grant program for states to provide more hands-on environmental education programs for children and to support the creation of state environmental literacy plans and teacher training in environmental education.

The National Wildlife Federation reports today's children spend half as much time outside as their counterparts did 20 years ago and average 44.5 hours a week with some type of electronic entertainment. The federation's research also shows children who have a significant outdoor experience before age 11 are more likely to have a life-long conservation ethic.

In Connecticut, a two-year-old statewide initiative, introduced by Gov. M. Jodi Rell and coordinated by the state Department of Environmental Protection, was designed to reconnect families with the outdoors by showcasing the state's parks and forests through a variety of programs.

With discovery adventures, hiking, canoeing and other forms of recreation, families are encouraged to find ways to enjoy being outdoors together in quiet and active ways. On a local level, the mission of the Unplugged Learning Project is to promote nature-based learning, environmental stewardship and outdoor recreation through education, promotion of existing spaces, and the creation of new trails, parks and outdoor classrooms.



Susan Rietano Davey, Larry Sparks and Chris Gackstatter pose through a copy of Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods," which is the inspiration behind the Unplugged Learning Project. Photo by Lisa Brisson

"We said let's put together a plan that is unique to Avon. Let's look at the resources we have, get together with people and implement a project that will be anything we want it to be," said Mr. Gackstatter.

The first kernel of this idea grew from an encounter Ms. Rietano-Davey had at Roaring Brook School. She and her son Luke often bike to the school from their home at the Canton end of town.

"Luke arrives awake and not rushed. And we talk all the way to school," she said.

One day they saw Assistant Principal Sparks in front of the school. He also rides his bike, all the way from his home in Simsbury.

The adults were lamenting the lack of bikes using the rack and one comment led to another. Soon they were agreeing that children did not spend enough time outdoors and there was an opportunity at the schools to tie outdoor time directly to the curriculum.

"The nature's classroom at the Pine Grove School is underused and there is space for one at Roaring Brook. The idea would be to use the existing curriculum and teach it in a more engaging way," said Ms. Rietano-Davey.

"For example, they could study plant life and then plant a garden outside."

Mr. Sparks suggested that children could go outside to read, where the sounds of nature are soothing and can help them to focus.

"What children lose if they are not connected to their natural surroundings is the chance for solitude and reflection and an opportunity to collaborate and create," added Ms. Rietano-Davey.

For example, instead of structured sports time, children would benefit from creating their own games and rules.

"The difference between an organized baseball team and a sandlot baseball game is the difference between structured time and not. In a sandlot game, nothing is set up for the kids. They have to figure out all the rules," said Mr. Gackstatter.

"They have to solve problems as they come up, such as arguments or what to do if a number of players don't show up. These kinds of negotiation and planning skills have been lost."

Mr. Sparks said that part of the problem is the fear today's parents have about the dangers that could befall their children outdoors, a fear that was virtually non-existent when he was growing up.

"Now kids can sit inside and do things that won't bug their parents. They can plug into technology. We need to unplug them. That's where the name for the project comes from," he said.

He remembers regularly riding his bike 13 miles to the Union Village Dam on the Quechee River from his boyhood home in Hanover, N.H. He also went on hikes as a Boy Scout and attended an Outward Bound program in Oregon.

Mr. Sparks recently discovered among his papers an admission pass to the Appalachian Trail, which he



Roaring Brook School teacher Joe Pereira and parents lead a group of students to school on the Walking School Bus, part of the Unplugged Learning Project.

hiked with his brother, father and uncle on Mount Washington in 1964.

"If I went 13 miles on my bike, then my dad probably biked 40 miles when he was a boy. My kids are lucky to be able to make it to the end of our neighborhood," he said.

The day that Ms. Rietano Davey and her son pulled into the school yard on their bikes, there was only one bike in the bike rack. When he was riding to school, there would be 75 or so bikes. During his first few months at Roaring Brook, Mr. Sparks walked around the grounds to get a sense of his surroundings. He wandered behind the school and found a tributary of the Roaring Brook buried in a culvert.

"We need to uncover it. Just uphill from there, I could hear trickling water and birds and I could see clear water and wildlife. I thought, the kids need to come out and do their frog unit here," he said.

"If we can make the back couple of acres attractive, it would be a great place to go. The kids could sit and think or dig up worms."

One Town One Book is the first event of the Unplugged Learning Project, created to encourage residents to read the book and visit the project's web site. The culmination is a public discussion to be led by local area historian and author David Leff.

"We hope residents will buy into the concept that the community, and especially kids, are disconnected from the outside world. Getting people to use what we have is a big piece of the idea," said Ms. Rietano Davey.

Recently the founders organized a Walking School Bus event, in which they stopped at every school bus stop on Blueberry Lane and asked children to join them in walking to the next stop. On the way, they talked about what can be seen and heard in nature.

"We want parents to be engaged, too, because kids learn by modeling. They learn different behaviors from seeing a parent sitting with a clicker versus one going out every day to walk the dog or water the garden," she said.

In addition to educating, the project aims to promote the use of existing trails, parks and open space, some of them owned by the land trust, and to create new trails, connecting Roaring Brook to Thompson Brook School so that children can bike between the two without riding in the street. The land trust already owns the land behind Roaring Brook School and has plans to develop it as a nature's classroom with an outdoor amphitheater and design curriculum to utilize it. Ms. Rietano Davey has taken on the role of facilitator and project manager for the initiative.

"Sue has brought the land trust's enthusiasm to the table. It would be good to work together with the schools on making the Unplugged Learning Project a town-wide effort," said Mr. Sparks.

For details, or to leave a comment, visit www.avon-landtrust.org/unplugged or call 606-9589. **AL**