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## Leave no child inside

### Get kids outside more often and watch the stimulus work

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By Janet Milkman

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 growing, so much so that Robert Wood Johnson researchers report that the United States has the potential of raising the first generation of children to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

No wonder. Obesity in children increased from about 4 percent in the 1960s to close to 20 percent in 2004. ADHD diagnoses increased by 33 percent between 1997 and 2002. 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 had names -- Clam Rock, Ship Rock, Bed Rock. We'd 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."

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 percent (7.4 hours a week) from 1981 to 1997 and an additional 4 percent (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 percent.
- Americans spend 170 minutes a day watching TV and movies, nine 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!

Mr. Louv maintains that this is not just an issue of environmental concern -- that we're raising a generation of kids who won't value nature or vote for nature -- but it also is a concern for children's emotional, intellectual and physical well-being. Research now shows a positive correlation between contact with nature and children's development in all of these areas.

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, and that access to green spaces for play, and even a view of green settings, enhances peace, self-control and self-discipline within inner city youth, 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 places like Frick Park and Nine Mile Run, the Allegheny National Forest and Presque Isle State Park.

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 nature and see what happens.

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