

Last Child in the Woods? Every Child in the Woods

Pat Keeley

Now that spring is here, families have been lingering on the playground after school and our afternoon classes have especially enjoyed the late afternoon view of the Berrybrook fields. There is something about the natural beauty of Berrybrook that makes people feel welcome and relaxed. The abundance of outdoor time brings to mind the book, *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv. In the book, Mr. Louv makes the case for “Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder.” He quotes Robin Moore, Director of the National Learning Initiative at North Carolina State, who writes,

“Children live through their senses. Sensory experiences link the child’s exterior world with their interior, hidden, affective worlds. Since the natural environment is the principal source of sensory stimulation, freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for healthy development.... This type of self-activated, autonomous interaction is what we call free play. Individual children test themselves by interacting with their environment, activating their potential and reconstructing human culture.”

Modern society is providing less and less unstructured time outdoors for children and more and more activities that happen indoors or in front of a computer screen. I remember as a child, I would leave the house after breakfast, and go outside until I got hungry for lunch, then I would go back outside until my mother called us in for dinner, I grew up in Boston, but my neighborhood had plenty of school yards, gardens and parks that brought my playmates and me in close contact with nature. Today, children need to be supervised more closely, but it doesn’t mean that we cannot provide safe experiences for them in natural settings. At Berrybrook, children have always been able to enjoy a rich, open, outdoor environment that presents many choices for creative play and engagement.

In the *Last Child in the Woods* Richard Louv states,

“The quiet wisdom of nature does not try to mislead you like the landscape of the city does, with billboards and ads everywhere. It doesn’t make you feel like you have to conform to any image. It’s just there and accepts everyone.”

I am so thankful for the abundant resources available at Berrybrook; for our beautiful natural setting, for Katharine Mann’s vision, for the board of directors who keep Berrybrook headed in the right direction, for the teachers who inspire, for the parents who care, and for the children who teach us something new every single day. I am thankful that the Berrybrook setting and our philosophy so closely reflect the natural world.