



Let's Go Outside:

Benefits for Our Children (and Ourselves!) / By K. Meagan Ledendecker

Exhausted and emotionally drained after a ten-hour day, I made a last-minute decision and turned my mini-van toward Kennedy Park. Fifteen years ago the trails of Kennedy Park were my evening stomping grounds, where dog walks brought me out of doors on a daily basis. I needed to again walk along the worn path, let the sounds of cars and stress fade, breathe deeply, and reconnect.

Within minutes of walking in Kennedy Park, I began to cry, an emotional release I didn't even know I needed. A children's book by Molly Bang immediately came to mind. In the story, Sophie, a young child, runs outside. Upset and angry she runs and runs until she can't run anymore. Then she cries. She climbs her favorite tree and the wide world comforts her.

Whenever I read this book, *When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry*, to children, they hang on every word, as if soaking up Sophie's experience. Yet how often do we let our children slam the door, run outside, and seek solace in nature? How often do we, as adults, do this?

I think about Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, in which he coins the phrase "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the costs of our alienation from nature. Certainly I see a difference in my own children after they've spent time being outside. Maybe it's the fresh air, or the room to run, or just the possibility they find in a corner of grassy field. I feel a difference in myself when I take the time to be outdoors, even if only to take a stroll down the street as the day shifts to dusk.

As humans, we're biologically designed to be outdoors. E.O. Wilson described this predisposition to connect to nature as the

"biophilia hypothesis." Numerous studies outline quantifiable benefits to being out of doors. *Business Insider* even offers "11 Scientifically Proven Reasons You Should Go Outside." From restored mental energy to immune system boosts, we benefit from getting out into the natural world.

In this age of trying to provide our children the best opportunities, shouldn't we be giving them more time outside? This summer is an excellent time to pay attention to those opportunities for children to connect to their place and to just be outside. If you are in need of fresh ideas for the children in your life, and even for yourself, Richard Louv's new book, *The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life: 500 Ways to Enrich Your Family's Health & Happiness*, is an excellent resource.

After my fifteen-minute walk in Kennedy Park, I definitely emerged a different person. The stress of the day disappeared. I looked forward to heading home for dinner and bedtimes. I found the solace I had needed.

I want my children to have this experience, too. Whenever possible, I'm sending them outside. And in my search for summer camps, I'll be paying attention to how much time they have for exploratory outdoor play!

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, cofounder and Director of Education at The Montessori School of the Berkshires (MSB), loves the summer camps at MSB that incorporate art, movement, music, and science through exploration of the natural world. Over the years, her three children have, too! www.berkshiremontessori.org.

