

Getting Kids Out

Want to save the world tomorrow? Take a child hiking today.

by Dennis Lewon

Making the case for getting kids outdoors is like telling people to floss their teeth: Everyone agrees it's the right thing to do, but still it doesn't always get done.

To avoid sounding like a dentist, I'll skip the litany of benefits you've already heard about, and go straight to the clincher: A *California Department of Education* study released earlier this year offers surprising evidence that kids who spend time outdoors become *smarter* than those who don't. And that's just for starters. Not only did the sixth graders in the study who attended a 5-day outdoor program raise their science scores by an average of 27 percent, but teachers also rated them higher than their indoor classmates in the following categories: self-esteem, conflict resolution, relationship with peers, problem solving, motivation to learn and behavior in class. It's no hyperbole to say that for all kids – but especially for the urban, at-risk youth the study targeted – an outdoor experience can change a life forever.



But this isn't some guilt trip. Unlike dental hygiene, taking a kid hiking is no chore. And you never know what you'll learn yourself. I've had a 12-year-old teach me how to let a bumblebee tickle my palm. And I never would have discovered the thrills of snowball tag if not for a gang of restless adolescents. Imagine that: A kid's future gets brighter – plus, his mind gets sharper – while you act a bit younger outdoors.

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