

Get the kids out in nature

Some ideas to keep children busy, outside

By Coloradoan staff • December 28, 2008

With the kids off on holiday break, here are some outdoor-related activities to help you keep them active this time of year, or other times of the year.

The activities are part of a program for school-aged children developed by Delwin Benson, a professor and extension wildlife specialist at the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology at Colorado State University.

It is an effort to address Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods," which suggest that this is the last generation to have contact with nature unless we do something.

Here are some ideas:

10 activities for younger children

1. Put on blindfolds, then sit and listen for five minutes. Longer or shorter times might be needed based on the people involved and their experience in the environment. Discuss what you heard when time is up.
2. Go for a slow walk with blindfolds on and with a partner leading the activity. Touch interesting parts of the environment, such as the bark of trees, texture of plants, places that are warm and others that are cool. Develop senses of smell, touch, curiosity and wonder.
3. Build maps of your yard, open space, nearby community parks, etc. Use big sheets of paper for young kids and move up to GPS locations and better maps later. Show hills and valleys, water and dry spots and rocky areas. Identify where grasses, shrubs and trees grow separately and in association with each other. Determine if someone planted the vegetation or if it is native. Perhaps Google Earth can provide a base map. What is natural? What is human caused? Track changes.
4. Find a hillside that was eroded or dig small holes in the soil to learn about soil differences. Are they sandy, made up of larger particles? Are they clay, which gets sticky and holds together when

you add a little water? Or are they a mixture called loam? Are soils dark, indicating they have decayed plant materials inside and are quite good for growing gardens or crops? Perhaps they are light colored and filled with rocks, making them more difficult to use for planting.

5. Now might be a good time to put the names of rocks, soils, plants and animals to what you see. Get good field guides and learn how to identify major features of plants and animals first, and then begin to see the smaller specifics that separate one animal from others. For example, learn the difference between sparrows and finches first, and then begin to learn the various species of each. Some animals might be detected best by their tracks.

6. Learn about nature through LandHelp, www.LandHelp.info, and elsewhere on the Internet. Look under sections about animals, forests, pests, landscape and gardening, next child in the woods, small acreage management, weather, sustainability, teaching packages and other sites of interest. You will get more ideas for fun activities and improve knowledge for action.

7. Animals are not always present throughout the year. They might migrate short or long distances, some animals will hide in holes, under rocks or in the mud during winter. Learn the times of year that they are in the area and look forward to seeing them arrive again the next year.

8. Have kids paint what they see. Kids need to see specifics of color, form and texture to paint. Help them to be observant. Help them to question. Help them to answer.

9. Keep journals with notes and reflections about nature and what is seen, learned and unknown. These can be personal or shared with others. Fill in the blanks.

10. Take field trips and hikes to new places and apply what was learned previously to the new settings. You don't need to go far. Nature is everywhere.

10 activities for older children

1. Volunteer with state and federal natural resources management agencies or other volunteer programs. Get hands-on experiences.

2. Ride bicycles in the neighborhood and on city and regional trails. Enjoy the beauty of open spaces. Look for and record interesting aspects of nature.

3. Create a nature treasure hunt when hiking or biking to give a few objectives to youth that promote seeing and exploring.

- 4.** Join a local bike club. Develop bike riding stamina at a local health club cycling class.
- 5.** Go camping, even winter camping. Learn outdoor skills such as cooking and survival techniques.
- 6.** Learn to fish. Take fishing seminars at local sporting goods shops.
- 7.** Climb rocks. Visit local climbing walls to learn the basics. Hook up with others with similar interests.
- 8.** Take a hunter education course from the local state wildlife agency.
- 9.** Attend meetings and field trips of local birding groups such as Audubon Society.
- 10.** Build your knowledge and gain inspiration by reading. Read about nature and peoples' reactions to nature and impacts on nature.