

Suffering an unnatural deficit

Australian youngsters aren't getting enough of their essential greens

THEA O'CONNOR

MANY parents fret over whether their children are eating enough green vegetables, but the amount of green exercise they get may be just as important.

The effect of nature on children's development was discussed at the recent Healthy Parks Healthy People congress in Melbourne, attended by more than 1000 delegates from 38 countries.

Keynote speaker Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, says humanity is conducting an unprecedented experiment on children, who today are more disconnected from direct experience of the natural world than at any other time in human history.

Louv coined the term nature deficit disorder not as a serious attempt at a medical diagnosis but to ring alarm bells about the harm caused by alienating children from the natural world.

The predictions aren't pretty: overweight, unfit, stressed children with poor eyesight, little resilience and lacking empathy with nature. In short, marshmallow kids, bubble-wrapped children raised by hovering parents.

Is nature deficit something to be taken seriously or is it a bad case of baby boomers romanticising their free-range childhoods?

"Children raised in the 70s and 80s can remember their parents saying: 'Go outside and play until dinner is ready', while children growing up today may well remember their childhood as a view from the back seat of a car as they are driven from one scheduled activity to the next," says Karen Malone, associate professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong in NSW.

Technophilia, shrinking backyards, tightening safety regulations in schools and childcare centres and over-scheduled child-

hoods all contribute to the creation of this generational nature gap, according to Malone, but parental fear about stranger danger and road safety is largely to blame.

Research Malone presented at the congress shows young children are well-schooled in their parents' fears. Her study of 300 children aged four to eight years in the western suburbs of Melbourne found two-thirds said they weren't allowed to play outside their garden gate. "What was most significant were the reasons children gave," Malone says: "You might get lost or kidnapped" (four-year-old girl), "I would like to go outside my garden but I might get killed" (six-year-old girl).

According to *Growing Up in Australia*, a longitudinal study of Australian children by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, children aged six to nine spent just under two hours a day outdoors on the weekend between 2004 and 2008. Four and five-year-olds spent 2.3 hours outside on weekdays.

While there's no trend data available to prove this is less outdoor time than a few generations ago, there are good indicators that childhood is moving indoors.

One is the decline in active transport. "Between 1985 and 2001 we saw declines in children walking and riding to school among 10 to 12-year-olds in Melbourne, as well as in the number of physical education classes in schools," says Jo Salmon, professor at the school of exercise and nutrition sciences at Victoria's Deakin University.

Another is the time children spend in front of a screen. *Growing Up in Australia* found in 2004 the average four-year-old spent 2.3 hours watching television on weekdays, 2.2 hours on weekends plus 20 minutes using a computer on any day of the week.

The UN Children's Fund takes



NARELLE DEBENHAM

Scarlett, 3, and mother Michelle Fenton participate in Nureded Kids in Frankston, Melbourne

the risk of nature deficit seriously, listing access to green spaces for plants and animals as a right of the child in its definition of child-friendly cities.

A research summary of the health benefits of contact with nature available on the congress website, prepared by Deakin University, helps explain why.

According to the review, contact with nature reduces stress, boosts immunity, enhances productivity, promotes healing, re-

duces anxiety and depression, and even cuts crime rates. Spending time in natural surroundings encourages physical activity and improves cognitive functioning in children, including reducing symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Brien Holden, University of NSW professor and chief executive of the Vision Co-operative Research Centre, encourages outdoor play in children for another reason: "We are seeing an in-

creased incidence of myopia [short-sightedness] in children due to increased concentrated near work. Spending more time outdoors is one of the most powerful influences on vision in children, significantly reducing the risk of becoming short-sighted. Play with a distant horizon is likely to be more effective than play in a visually confined space."

Nature play for children is regarded as an educational as well as a health issue, says Barbara Chan-

cellor, director of early childhood programs at Melbourne's RMIT University: "When children play in a natural environment they really drive their own learning."

Chancellor says the amount of experimentation and creativity that occurs is directly proportional to the amount of loose objects available for children to manipulate. "When playing freely outdoors, children have access to many loose materials, such as leaves, branches and stones, which offer limitless possibilities," she says.

"A stick can be anything a child wants it to be. That's different to playing with toys which are designed for certain outcomes and so offer limited possibilities."

Barbara Champion, executive director of the Playground & Recreation Association of Victoria, is also concerned about the state of Australia's playgrounds, especially in schools. She will appear at a Senate inquiry into the Rudd government's stimulus building project in schools. "The new buildings are completely dominating what little open space there is in many schools across the country without any consideration being given to importance of outdoor play for children," Champion says.

Recent Australian research highlights the importance of protecting green space in school playgrounds.

Social scientist Katie Bagot, now with VicHealth, examined 500 children in 14 schools across Melbourne. She found the higher the level of vegetation in the school yard, the better children's classroom attention scores after playing in that environment, which in turn predicted higher academic scores.

Malone says cultural and attitudinal change is paramount to making the outdoors in again for children. Her work includes running seminars to help parents lengthen the rein on their children so they can enjoy more unstructured time in nature, while soothing parental anxiety.

"I put their fears into perspective by giving them the facts about safety, that Australian suburbs are

now much safer for children than they were three decades ago, for example," Malone says. "And I point out that bubble-wrapping children places them at even greater risk of the very dangers parents are trying to protect their children from. If children aren't given opportunities to take risks, they can't build the resilience and risk-assessment skills they need to be able to navigate their environment competently."

Some parents seek practical advice as they don't know what to do with children in a natural space, Malone says.

In the southeastern Melbourne suburb of Frankston, Narelle Debenham is playing her part in re-skilling parents through her program Nureded Kids. "Parents like knowing their children are safe [sitting] on the lounge, but they also know it's not doing them any good."

Debenham organises weekly excursions to explore nature in the local area. Last week, 35 children, their parents and grandparents planted indigenous shrubs along the Kananook creek to help restore the waterway. "The program always goes ahead, rain, hail or shine, because kids love playing in puddles, and exposure to all weathers builds their immunity," Debenham says.

The program targets children aged zero to five. Debenham explains: "If children have positive experiences in nature early on and become comfortable and confident in it, they will think of nature as a recreational option and not just turn to technology for play."

Debenham is adamant young children shouldn't be burdened with environmental woes.

"You can create eco-phobia in children if all they know about nature is the scary stuff, the natural disasters, animals dying or forests being destroyed," she says.

"Instead, I focus on cultivating a love of nature in children, then they'll naturally want to look after it."

Nature Play WA:
www.natureplaywa.org.au