



KUFM RADIO COMMENTARY

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Be Out There

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When I was a child, playing outdoors was just about my only option. My friends and I roamed the marshes and woodlands within walking or biking distance from our neighborhood. We found plenty of stuff to do and, incidentally, absorbed a good deal of information about nature and the creatures living there that has served me well during my 30-year career as a wildlife biologist. During the summer, my dad would take us canoeing and in the winters we'd clear snow from a nearby lake so we could skate and play hockey. When I was old enough, my dad took me hunting and I learned how to avoid getting lost, how to keep my feet dry, and the habits of the wild creatures I sought--mostly unsuccessfully. For a long time my father resisted buying a TV as he didn't want us to sit watching that black and white screen when we could be outside playing. We eventually got a TV, but only because he wanted to watch the news. He resisted our arguments and limited the amount of time we could spend in front of the screen.

With much less success, I've tried to encourage my own boys--now both adults--to spend time outside. I'm convinced it would be better for them if they did, but they have so many opportunities now to do other things. Most of these other things happen indoors, such as watching TV, playing video games, updating Facebook pages, tweeting, watching videos on YouTube, listening to their IPODS, or searching the web for news and information. These activities were unavailable when I was a child. Although I've yet to tweet anyone or get tweeted, I spend time doing these electronic things, too, but not nearly as much as my kids. However, the outdoor preferences I developed as a child have stuck with me. Unfortunately, I'm not confident that my efforts to get my kids outdoors will persist into their lifetime preferences. If this is the case, it will be too bad.

I was appalled to read a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study that revealed that kids aged 8-18 now devote an average 7.5 hours daily to their electronic activities. That's more than 53 hours a week; more than most of us spend working. The amount of time our kids spent on these sedentary activities has been trending upwards for decades and the 53 hours/week represents an increase of 1 hour and 17 minutes over results from just 5 years ago.

This trend has significant costs. There is a correlation, for example, between time spent on electronic media and grades. Those kids using electronic media for more than 16 hours a day get significantly lower grades than those using less than 3 hours a day. Another study reported that later academic achievement was related to the amount of television watched by children under age 3. Additionally, in an Iowa study, electronic media use was correlated with obesity. Kids using electronic media less than 2 hours/day were at normal average body mass while those watching more electronic media were more likely to be obese. Obesity among children age 6-11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years and now is 17%. The rate of clinically obese adolescents (age 12-19) has more than tripled to 17.6 percent. In a typical week, only 6% of children ages 9-13 now play outside on their own.

The American Academy of pediatrics concluded that 60 minutes of daily unstructured free play is essential to children's physical and mental health. However, by the time most children go to kindergarten, they have spent

more than 5,000 hours in front of a television. That's enough time to earn a college degree. The kids who do play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, are less aggressive, and show better concentration. They have better eyesight and fewer problems associated with deficits of the sunshine vitamin D. Outdoor play has been found to be widely effective in reducing attention deficit symptoms in children.

These facts come from the National Wildlife Federations Website, www.BeOutThere.org. This site also has lots of suggestions for how your family can take advantage of outdoor activities wherever you live. It may seem ironic to direct you to a website to find out how to get outside, but I never said that electronic media was all bad. Used correctly, it can be a springboard to finding ways to get away from your electronic screens. At www.BeOutThere.org, you'll learn that one of the keys to getting your kids outside is to go with them, that way both of you will enjoy the benefits that come from outdoor activities.

One of the most innovative institutions we are fortunate to have in western Montana is the Missoula Children's Theater. MCT has recognized the value of finding ways to get kids engaged in outdoor activities and, with the financial support of the Forest Service, is now offering an assembly called "Where is The Great Outdoors" as part of its nationwide tours of little red trucks that provide theater opportunities to some 70,000 children every year. You can see a filmed version of this assembly on the website of the same name, www.wherethegreatoutdoors.com. If your child's school is expecting a little red truck this year, the school can arrange with MCT to have the assembly presented.

The next time you renew your vehicle registration in Montana, you can show your support for efforts like these that encourage parents and children to enjoy the great outdoors. The National Wildlife Federation's Northern Rockies and Prairies Regional Center now has an attractive Montana license plate on the theme of "no child left inside" that you can put on your car to remind you, and others who see it, of the importance of outdoor recreation and activities. You can see this license plate at the MT Motor Vehicle Department's website, <http://www.doj.mt.gov/driving/images/plates/wildlife/platenationalwildlifefederation.jpg>.

Here in Montana, we have an unmatched wealth of outdoor activities with which we can engage our children. It would be a terrible loss to them, if we didn't take advantage of these opportunities to build a love of nature and the great outdoors into our children's lives and, instead, allowed them to develop indoor habits that they could just as well engage in if they lived in downtown LA or New York. Especially if your children are young, now is the time to get them involved in hunting, fishing, bird watching, hiking, watersports, skiing, and--even--walking the dog. They and you will enjoy it more if you do it together.

This is Sterling Miller for the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula. Thanks for listening.