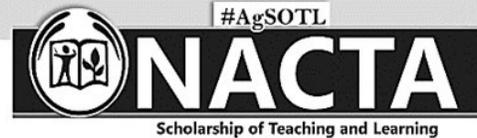


Book Reviews



Vitamin N: 500 Ways to Enrich the Health & Happiness of Your Family & Community

Richard Louv. 2016. Algonquin Paperbacks, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
Paperback (277 pp)

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Since the publication of his widely acclaimed books *Last Child in the Woods* in 2008 and *The Nature Principle* in 2011, author Richard Louv has been near the top of a growing list of advocates for early learning about ecology and natural systems. His practical and accessible approach provides a broad appeal to parent's intent on helping their children overcome what he calls the 'nature deficit disorder' widely present in the current generation. Louv points out that this is a book for parents and others concerned about connecting children with nature, but also for those of all ages who would like to find creative ways of getting outdoors and becoming active. Obviously missing from his description of '500 Ways' is the recent craze over Pokémon GO © that does get kids off the couch, but fails to separate them from their beloved electronic apparatus that fuels the computer generation.

From the first chapter on through the book the author emphasizes the importance of bonding, the relationships that can be built "within the family, among friends, and in the community" [p. 3]. He introduces the idea that such connections with nature start with the type of stroller or backpack we choose, exposing even small children to the elements of nature much as parents in the Nordic Region often park their children outside in warm clothing in almost any weather in winter. We would call this in horticulture the process of 'hardening off' plants before transplanting them into a cold and unpredictable environment. Is there a parallel?

One theme that runs through several chapters is the importance of dedicating quality time to nature-based activities. It is obvious that we should make each event age-appropriate, and that pace of completing any task or observation should be guided by the interests and open-ended excitement of those we are with. Just as none of us would consider yanking a dog away from a bush or fire hydrant before their task is completed, we should recognize that 'the process is more important than the product' in the introduction of kids to nature. Taking time to carefully examine a centipede making its way across the path, or turning over a rock to see who lives underneath, can lead to exciting questions like 'How does it move?' or 'Why would someone like to live under a rock?' or 'Where do you think it is going? or "Why?". These are all open-ended questions that add value to the experience, and of course it is not important to know the answers but to stimulate observational skills and curiosity.

In a chapter on 'The Hybrid Mind' the author explores the importance of gaining experiences from both the virtual world and actual experiences in nature. He urges us to lose our fears of small injuries and encourage kids to 'play in mud puddles, climb trees, roll down hills, walk or run through the forest, and build forts, dens, and tree houses' [p.24-25]. All these

activities build confidence and increase sensory capacities in ways that staring at a mobile device cannot provide. One of our MSc students from Sri Lanka operationalized these ideas by blindfolding young students and leading them quietly and barefoot, together through a tropical rain forest, urging them to listen, taste, feel, and hear the diverse environment around them. She even had actors along the way – Mohammed, Chief Seattle, Gandhi – jump out from hiding and provide a short lecture on respect for the natural world. These are additional real-world examples that extend the 500 listed in the book.

Downstream the author suggests some ‘blended activities’ that take advantage of young people’s fascination with electronics: digital cameras to ‘capture’ wildlife in situ, use a cell phone to record bird calls or other animal vocalizations, search for web sites with live cameras that report on nature in real time, or find the right clothes to go outside any day of the year. In Norway the saying is, ‘There is no bad weather, only the wrong clothes’. It is exciting for this reviewer to live and teach in the Scandinavian Region each year for two months, where the society still lives and eats and ventures outside whenever possible. Many of my Norwegian colleagues and neighbors here would view Louv’s book and ask, “What is so innovative about this?”

There are games from around the world, examples from diverse cultures, and ideas from other languages about how kids connect with the environment. Especially exciting are the ideas about how these ideas can be applied locally, even in the back yard and in the immediate community. Making a pizza garden, a compost bin, a garden as source of ‘fast food’ that kids can pick and consume on the spot, or a map of the immediate environment are all ways of experiential, hands-on learning that appeal to children of all ages. A great suggestion is to set boundaries for children where they have safe space, an area that expands as they grow, and to enlist neighbors and the community in planning and supervision of kids of all ages. The author puts special emphasis on ‘leave no child inside’ [p.107] by finding ways that children of all abilities can participate with their own potentials for mobility.

The ideas in the book are arranged to some degree on a spatial hierarchy, where the boundaries and the range of activities expand as children get older and can take advantage of more freedom. There are urban parks, and even some which are close to the wild such as our own Wilderness Park in Lincoln, Nebraska that stretches some seven miles from the city along a creek toward a large Audubon prairie nature preserve. Children can learn about their own bioregions – prairie, forest, seashore – and begin to understand how and why each is unique, as well as why they should be preserved. All this experience builds a sense of place, of grounding, of security. The author quotes Wendell Berry, who said that “You can’t know who you are until you know where you are” [p. 117].

In a brief review, it is impossible to summarize the wealth of ideas included in Vitamin N, but the goal is to provide a flavor of what is in the book and how innovative activities can be initiated. There are many stimulating ideas and props for them that can be crafted from materials at hand, or from no materials at all and only a creative imagination. This appears to be the goal of the author, to help open our eyes to what is possible and available, and to what every child should experience.

What Louv provides is a set of practical and low-cost ideas that can be introduced right in your own back yard, in nearby parks or wild areas, or during trips to a real wilderness. One element that adds credibility to apparently disconnected activities throughout the book is

frequent reference to published literature on child development and learning. In fact, an extensive section called 'Notes' provides a highly relevant annotated bibliography to lead the reader to original sources of both theory and practical application. There are quotes from 'other voices' at the end of each chapter, enriching what is written around specific topics. The reference list and index add accessibility to specific ideas, and the incredibly wide array of suggested activities cannot help but stimulate the reader to go on from here. This is a book highly recommended to people of all ages, but especially those who can use their talents to get children out to experience nature in new and innovative ways.

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