

Wild places — Antidotes for Agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is seen by most people as the fear of large, public spaces. It is a condition where sufferers become anxious in unfamiliar environments or where they perceive that they have little control. While most psychologists believe that experiencing Nature helps improve mental health for sufferers of agoraphobia wilderness encounters can be very traumatic. The dilemma is that the very elements that can improve mental health may also adversely impact on it unless people are introduced to Nature at an early age and learn to fit naturally into wild surroundings. Because FIDO believes that Fraser Island can contribute substantially to public health, this FIDO Backgrounder No 76 by John looks at aspects of overcoming a deterrent to some people visiting natural areas. (MOONBI supplement March 2016)

Agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder characterized by anxiety in situations where the sufferer perceives the environment to be dangerous, uncomfortable, or unsafe. These situations can include wide-open spaces, uncontrollable social situations, unfamiliar places, shopping malls, airports, and bridges. Agoraphobia is ... a subset of panic disorder, involving the fear of incurring a panic attack in those environments. However, agoraphobia is classified as being separate from panic disorder. The sufferers may go to great lengths to avoid those situations, in severe cases becoming unable to leave their homes or safe havens. (Wikipedia)

Childhood: Childhood experiences provide either the genesis or the antidote to agoraphobia. Outdoor experience at a young age helps avoid developing an aversion for it in later life. Paranoia about the potential dangers of outdoor play is resulting in a growing aversion and even fear of going into the bush. While agoraphobia isn't an epidemic, an increasingly urbanised global population is becoming estranged from Nature and wilderness.

About 1 in 3 people spend less than 18 minutes per day in outdoor recreational activities. That is about the same amount of time it takes to hang out a load of washing. Respondents to a Planet Ark survey of people aged 14-64 years spend on average less than 2 hours per week doing outdoor recreational activities like playing sport, exercising, playing with children, exercising a pet, gardening or just relaxing. For every hour we spend outside, we spend over seven hours in front of screens watching television or on the Internet. **Parents setting the example is the best way to get kids to spend more time outdoors.**

In its 2012 report, *Planting Trees: Just What The Doctor Ordered*, Planet Ark recommended that children get a daily dose of 30 minutes of green time. Not surprisingly, Planet Ark's research shows that the more time parents spend outdoors, the more time their children spend outdoors resulting in more outdoor activities by their children. <http://treeday.planetark.org/documents/doc-534-climbing-trees-research-report-2011-07-13-final.pdf>

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Overwhelmingly adults surveyed agreed that outdoor play:

- allows children to use their imaginations
- helps develop physical and motor skills
- provides an outlet for reducing everyday stress.

Yet at the same time in the space of one generation:

- 73% of respondents played outdoors more often than indoors when they were young. Only 13% of their children play outdoors more than indoors.

- 72% of respondents played outside every day as kids compared to only 35% of their children
- 1 in 10 children today play outside once a week

In Britain a similar survey of 2,000 parents, exposed a sharp divide between what they believe is good for their children and what they actually allow them to do. Parents would rather let them watch DVDs than climb trees. Only 30 per cent are allowed to take part in activities such as climbing trees where they might risk bumps and scrapes. A third of children aged between six and 15 have never climbed a tree, a quarter have never rolled down a hill and almost half have never made a daisy chain, the survey found. Researchers discovered that one in ten children cannot ride a bicycle and a third have no idea how to play hopscotch or build a den.

Experts warn unless something is done, today's kids could grow into a generation of dysfunctional adults.

Benefits of out door play

There is a growing body of research, which strongly indicates that the benefits of active outdoor play are profound.

Reported benefits include:

- Better motor coordination and increased ability to concentrate.
- The outdoor environment allows children to move freely, placing fewer constraints on children's gross motor movement and less restriction on their range of visual and gross motor exploration.
- Greenery in a child's everyday environment specifically reduces attention deficit symptoms. (Settings with trees and grass are the most beneficial).
- More opportunities for decision making stimulates problem solving and creative thinking.
- Children are more likely to develop responsible attitudes toward risk.
- Play promotes learning about vital social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, negotiation and leadership.
- Free play has the ability to improve many aspects of emotional wellbeing, including minimising anxiety, repression, aggression and sleep problems.
- Mood may be positively affected not only by the physical activity itself but also by exposure to sunlight if the activity occurs outdoors.

Outdoor life is good for the health both mind and body and needs to be encouraged more both for children and adults in the interests of a healthier society.

National Parks Queensland is recognising and addressing getting kids outside. NPAQ has recently launched a free guide booklet called Getting Kids into National Parks to help connect our youth to the natural world and inspire stewardship of the environment for the future. The booklet can be downloaded at: <http://www.npaq.org.au/latest-news/getting-kids-into-national-parks>