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## In defense of play

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At this time of year, I'd rather be outside watching BB-sized tomatoes emerge on my West Virginia '63s. So I sneaked away this week through my computer to a Congressional hearing in Washington called "No Child Left Inside."

If you despair that your children, grandchildren or other young people you care about are completely isolated from the natural world, you're in good company.

"Today's children are in danger of losing their connection, or never getting a connection to nature," Gina McCarthy, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, told members of Congress on Thursday.

Society as a whole, as well as individual children, will suffer if this connection is lost, she said. They will grow up not understanding and even fearful of the natural world. Speaking to two subcommittees of the House Committee on Natural Resources, McCarthy warned that children who never get the chance to discover the wonder of the natural world will grow into taxpayers and voters who won't care about forests, parks or the value of biodiversity.

Various panelists reported that national parks and forests are drawing fewer visitors, many of the nation's locally run urban parks are crumbling, and after years of increasing enthusiasm for fishing, there's a sag in interest. Children are less likely to play outside in their own yards or in their neighborhoods, to the detriment of their own health and fitness.

Part of the problem is the magnetic glow of electronic media, including video games, the Internet and good old-fashioned TV.

But also, children are doing exactly what adults are telling them to do, the professionals told lawmakers.

Adults have built environments, schedules and rules that discourage or even prohibit children from doing the things their grandparents did, a phenomenon outlined by Richard Louv in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*. Children aren't allowed to explore streams, turn over rocks, build forts, climb trees, gaze at the clouds, initiate their own games and negotiate their own conflicts with other children.

Instead, children are shuttled to and from organized sports events or supervised at manicured and sterile playgrounds. Those are the fortunate ones. The less fortunate are afraid to go outside because of dangers, real or perceived. Or, all the adults are working and not available to make sure children get even controlled and supervised outdoor play.

Only 6 percent of American children aged 9 to 13 play outside, said Amy Pertschuk, managing director of the Children and Nature Network. Reading testimony prepared by Louv, Pertschuk said bike riding has dropped by 31 percent compared to previous years. There are a number of reasons, but the biggest one is fear.

“Parents are conditioned by round-the-clock news coverage. They believe there is an epidemic of abductions.” Instead, she said, the number of children abducted has remained level for two decades. “Child safety is at an all-time high.”

There’s more at stake than just some soft-focused, rose-tinted nostalgia for those children when they hit middle age.

“Play is the work of childhood,” said Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, who testified on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Play is essential to healthy development. It allows children to develop imagination, dexterity and physical, cognitive and emotional strength. During unstructured play, children conquer fears while practicing adult rules. They have time to reflect and decompress, and they grow healthy and fit.

The threat to unstructured outdoor play is so important that in January, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a 10-page report in defense of it.

Ginsburg, who wrote that report, urged lawmakers to support federal policies that recognize the value of unstructured play.

Several people who testified linked the rise in childhood obesity to disappearing playtime, despite the fact that more children are participating in organized sports than ever.

Obesity is definitely connected to poverty and chronic stress, Ginsburg told the lawmakers.

So, if you’re a poor kid, he said, you need even more help protecting your playtime. Thirteen percent of American sixth-graders have no school recess, he said. “If you look at the poorest kids, that becomes 36 percent.”

Organized sports and demanding academics are also valuable, he said.

“It’s a call for balance.”

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