

**Y**ou hadn't noticed, but it is getting dark. After school, you skipped off the bus, grabbed a snack and bolted for the outdoors to meet with friends.

Now you're headed home from the adventure with soggy socks and stickers in your laces. Your cadence reflects both your concern for being late and the joyful anticipation you have for returning to that place tomorrow.

Although you never stopped to think about it, the past few hours shaped you

considerably. Helping Eddie up that tree would leave you sore tomorrow and more aware of your ability to work with others. Most significantly, there was something special about that oak—something about your spot on that fat limb next to the trunk. Your mom talked about God, but that was the place where you knew—without a doubt—He was real.

If you were born before the mid-1970s, you probably have stories similar to this. If you are younger, you

might not relate at all.

Either way, you know that technology has changed our world dramatically in a short time. You also probably recognize that today's youth are rarely in nature and that some have never spent time in the natural world.

What you may not be alerted to are the spiritual ramifications of such a lifestyle. Too few Christian leaders (camp professionals included) are asking a critical question, "How does growing up inside affect our spiritual development?"

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by Craig Lomax

# Growing up Inside

Today's kids are missing what camps can provide

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## Hearing God's Voice

Scripture provides us with some insights: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men

are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

God's creations are like nourishment with which He can feed us. Through nature, we can take in knowledge about His "eternal power and divine nature."

In the past, when we spent much of our time in creation, these were lessons He spoke clearly to our inner core without necessarily involving our minds. These lessons are now, at best, muffled through the car window or a nature program on television.

Is it OK to live—or engage in discipleship with youth—without these critical, foundational understandings that should be discovered by spending time in nature?

Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." It is difficult for me to see how this kind of fear (or respect) for our Maker can be substantially founded without experiencing Him through what He has made.

Isn't it this reverence that brings us to the wisdom of knowing that He is all-powerful and perfect—and that we are not? Doesn't this lead us to understanding the need we have to be forgiven and accepted? If so, then seeing youth arrive at that fear is a critical start to their journey of faith.

## Without Excuse?

But perhaps today's students have an "excuse" to journey without Him.

To our knowledge there has never been a culture so sheltered and distracted from what God has made. We spend our time in very comfortable, climate-controlled homes, automobiles, schools, gyms, and places of work. If we need to go outside, it is usually a momentary requirement.

Our innate desire to experience what God has made is squelched by a plethora of indoor inventions sophisticatedly designed to captivate our attention for hours on end. Most of those who do recreate or exercise outdoors use sidewalks or playing fields, rarely touching

## Close to the Creator

Consider the following tips for utilizing God's creation in your ministry.

- ▶ **Start with yourself.** Regularly get out in God's creation and develop your ability to meet Him outdoors.
- ▶ **Pray for and seek to hire staff members** who savor time with the Lord in nature.
- ▶ **Give staff the consistent opportunities** they need to be experts at connecting with God outdoors.
- ▶ **Convince your board and staff** of the need guests have to experience God through creation, perhaps even incorporating the goal to meet this need into your mission statement.
- ▶ **Inspect your current programs** for new possibilities that might meet the need.
- ▶ **Explore your property and locations** within an hour's drive where guests can be immersed in creation.
- ▶ **Be willing to invest time and finances** toward developing new programs.
- ▶ **Market and speak to parents, youth leaders, and teachers** with the goal of their recognizing the need for creation immersion for those they serve.
- ▶ **Rejoice when you see kids** who are dirty, wet, tired, excited, hot, cold, or even scratched up because of their time in creation.

—Craig Lomax

the natural world. We don't feel like we are living out a futuristic sci-fi movie, but when we describe our lifestyle, it sounds that way.

Today's Johnny skips off the bus, grabs a snack, and bolts for MySpace to meet up with friends. If the Internet doesn't keep his attention, he has a long list of options before he considers climbing a tree. He might try calling Eddie's cell or playing on his family's Xbox. If those don't carry him into the evening, there is always something on TV with dozens of channels and TiVo.

In the unlikely event that Johnny does come up with the innovative idea of going outside to play, he will probably have a tough time doing so. His parents are concerned about the risks of dangerous strangers, injuries, and (in some cases) wild animals.

Even if his mom and dad value the outdoors enough to let him brave the risks, where would he play? It is a rare community that has undeveloped space without community rules that prohibit the exposure to liability, unsightly forts, and other inconveniences that commonly accompany outdoor play. And it's a rare property owner who doesn't mind seeing kids cross his old cattle fence for an adventure.

In his book *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2006), Richard Louv also lists the difficulties our youth face in experiencing the natural world. He writes to inspire relief from what he calls "nature-deficit disorder."

Like Louv, my point is not that technology is unhealthy, that parents are foolish, or that developers are evil. My point is that there is something vital missing. We have accomplished what no other generation has. We are not just out in nature less than those before us; we are almost not experiencing it at all.

During the last few decades we have compensated mentally, physically, and socially as our time in nature has diminished. We work out our bodies, invent challenges, play group games, and climb corporate ladders, but can

we compensate spiritually for the lack of God's creation in our lives?

Shouldn't that be a concern for the church? What parts of the body of Christ are best fit to meet this recent need, and what are they doing about it? I believe many of our Christian camps are the perfect fit and are being honored with this call. But I'm not confident they are listening.

## Creation and Camps

While the Christian camping industry is struggling to be significant with tools like tradition, modern facilities, music programs, and climbing walls, it seems this critical need is left waiting for us like an unnoticed elephant in the lobby.

I'm concerned that we are missing a serious spiritual need while being preoccupied with what people want and, frankly, what they already have. I'm not saying that facilities and indoor programming are without value to the kingdom. I am saying that, in many cases, such things have monopolized our paradigm and are slowing our response to what Americans need so desperately.

It's time we move forward and take campers and guests back to nature. For many of us, I believe it is now our job to be experts at providing what used to come naturally. And it is our role to intentionally and courageously become those the church will turn to as it realizes the spiritual consequences of living in a country so void of time in creation.

This need is obviously not a temporary trend. As we see more of today's children become leaders and parents of youth, I expect the need will only increase.

At Rock-N-Water, kids camp in tents or under the stars. In the early 1990s, I used to ask groups of fourth-graders and their parents if they had ever slept outdoors. Lately, I have made a point of asking the same question of the same schools. I am consistently amazed to find that three times the number of parents compared to fewer than 20 years ago—sometimes a third of the adults

present—have never spent the night in the outdoors.

The past couple summers I've heard young teenagers inquire if the river we are whitewater rafting will "take us back to where we started," if a bird's song is real or "coming from someone hiding behind the trees," and if the beautiful rocks in a remote river canyon were "made by Disney."

At times like those, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I've decided to cry out to those who have—or will have—the power to put kids in the middle of God's creation in ways that they can't help but want to embrace Him.

## A Wise Move

I hope you will join me on an adventurous quest to satisfy a tremendous need of today's and tomorrow's youth. As we approach the challenge of providing soul-edifying encounters with God in His creation, we must look for what we don't know. We must discover what it takes to give today's guests these experiences and then be willing to implement the changes necessary to do so.

We may continue to find ways, like some camps have, to meet this need with tools like adventure, solitude, and science. But it is best if we journey with our eyes open to ways not yet traveled and with prayers for insight on our lips.

If we move now and move wisely, we may very well look back to see the present difficulties of the camping industry as birthing pains by which we began to teach youth how to experience God through what He has made.

Today's kids can be tomorrow's leaders who send the youth they serve to camp, not for tradition or a brand-new facility, but to meet the Lord in an awe-inspiring, life-changing way. ■



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## Related Resources

### In CCCA's Store

► *Camping and the Church* (Focus Series)

► *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv

► *Time out for Renewal* (Focus Series)

► *Using the Outdoor Setting to Communicate Spiritual Truths* (Focus Series)

### On the Internet

► *Answers in Genesis*  
[www.answersingenesis.org](http://www.answersingenesis.org)

► *Kids in Creation*  
[www.kidsincreation.org](http://www.kidsincreation.org)

► *Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "13 Ways Conference Centers Can Better Utilize the Outdoor Setting," "The Irreplaceable Component," and "School's in Session"*  
[www.soundword.com](http://www.soundword.com)