

by Jacob Rodenburg

Unplug...

and Plug into Nature



Sometimes we think that life is more complete when we're "plugged in". Our smart phones, tablets and computers help us to discover the world in new ways. We can connect to friends overseas; we can search out tidbits of information in fractions of a second. At the

same time, we tend to forget that nature has equipped us with marvelous sensory abilities – ones that enable us to "be in the world" in a way that technology just can't duplicate.

Take our eyes for example. Humans have the sight of a predator – stereoscopic vision that is able to perceive objects in three dimensions, gauging both depth and position. With the help of special "cones" in the back of our eyes, we can tell the difference

between 10 million colours! Our ears are placed on either side of our head to help us to pick up sound vibrations, channeling them through a funnel to the fluid-filled inner ear. We have hearing sensitive enough to be able to detect wind gently moving through grasses and robust enough to be able to take in the roar of a lion. We hear sounds from different locations simultaneously – one could say we hear in 3 dimensions. With every breath in and out, we pick up odours – over 10,000 of them and they are evocative enough to bring back distant childhood memories of a freshly baked pie or the smell of fresh rain. We are enveloped in skin – the barrier between us and the world. Special receptors called Meissner's corpuscles (in some locations like the finger tips, we have over 9,000 of these per square inch) respond to the slightest pressure, a gentle caress or the sweep of a cool breeze. Cramped in our mouth, like tiny volcanoes, our 10,000 taste buds help us to detect the faintest of flavours – for example, our tongue can help us detect bitterness in as little as one part per 2 million.

It is my hope that you can encourage your children to frequently unplug from technology and "plug in" to the natural world through the wonder of their senses, the most fundamental and arguably most powerful way to connect our children to nature. To drink the world in this way takes practice. Steve Van Matre, a well-known outdoor educator, calls activities that promote sensory awareness "**acclimatization activities**". Here are a few ideas to help your kids enhance their senses. Practice at least one of these every time you go outside!

HEARING FOCUSED HEARING

Take each hand, squeeze your fingers together and then cup your hands behind your ears. If you can, push your ears out. This simple gesture enhances your hearing by up to 10 times. Try this: listen to a natural sound in the distance without your hands. Then slip your hands behind your ears as described. You'll hear a noticeable difference! In a way, your ears have become "deer ears" – large parabolic dishes that capture sound waves. With your "deer ears" on, listen to the wind through the trees, the gurgling of water along a stream, the squelch of mud underfoot. Your hands have

focused sound right into your ear. This is a perfect way to begin learning the language of birds and frogs.

SMELL THE NOSE KNOWS

Next time you go for a walk, take along a wet sponge (it may help to cut this up into cubes about 3 cm x 3 cm) and several empty cups. Dab a sponge under everyone's nose. Just a little moisture on the upper lip will suffice. The wetness under your nose helps you to distinguish more odours. Try a little "scratch and sniff". Gently rub cedar leaves between your hands, or along bark, or among grasses. The act of rubbing releases chemicals that your nose will quickly register as a series of distinctive smells. As you hike, encourage your kids to selectively harvest tiny "bits" of the forest: a small pinch of soil, a part of a leaf, a petal of a wildflower, a flake of bark. Place these carefully into your cup. Add a small stick as a swivel stick. This is your aroma "cocktail"! Give each creation a name, perhaps "**leafatopia**" or "**forest fragrance**". Can you identify the smells?

VISION SPLATTER VISION

When we walk in a natural setting, chances are our eyes are cast down. Makes sense, for our inclination is not to stumble. However, by focusing only on our feet as we move through nature, we are missing so much of what is going on behind, above and to the sides of us. Practice being an "all around watcher" and use what naturalists call "**splatter vision**". This means not keeping your eyes in one place for too long. As you walk, glance up, glance to the sides, glance in the distance, glance up close. By continuously sweeping your eyes around, you are more likely to pick up movement in the landscape – perhaps a cotton tail rabbit huddled under a bush, an owl perched in a tree or a deer frozen on a hill side. Some of my most amazing discoveries have been out of the corner of my eye. Walk in silence and practice splatter vision. Take the time to recount your discoveries!

TASTE FOREST TEA

The healthiest food, argues Wendell Berry, is the shortest distance from the earth to

your mouth. Introduce kids to the edible wild and the wonder of tasting gifts from the landscape. You need to be careful, however. Please make the point that kids should only eat what an adult knows for certain is safe to eat. Stay away from berries (unless you can clearly identify them as the more common forest varieties such as raspberries, blackberries or blueberries). As you walk, harvest a handful of eastern white cedar (the needles look a bit like feathers) and white pine (long soft needles in bunches of 5). When you get home, toss these in boiling water and let steep for at least 10 minutes. The resulting tea will be bitter but refreshing and your tongue will dance with a pungent but evocative taste of the forest!

TOUCH MY PERSONAL FRIEND

This is a wonderful activity connecting touch with sight. It works best in open park land or school yard with lots of trees. You'll need one blindfold for every two people. To demonstrate the activity, blindfold one volunteer. Tell them that you are going to introduce them to a special friend. Gently walk with them, avoiding bumping into obstacles (they are blindfolded!) in a circuitous route, avoiding a straight line. Select a tree. Preferably one that isn't too big. Have them feel the texture of the bark, the arrangement of branches on the limbs, the shape of the leaves, the veining pattern on the underside of leaves, the girth of trunk, the proximity of neighbouring objects. The more tactile clues you offer, the better. Now take them back out (but not the same way!). Gently spin them once or twice and then remove the blindfold. Can they find their tree? Often this is easier said than done. Switch partners.

Remember, by activating your child's senses in nearby green spaces, you help them to feel like they are part of their environment. Think of this nature connection as a relationship. Like any relationship it may take time, effort and commitment but the benefits, both physical and mental, will last a lifetime. ●