

by Mary Ann Ebner

The Natural Act

Reconnecting with Nature

The lively group of three-year-olds in Sandy Dixon's preschool class look like they just hiked through the mud. But Dixon doesn't mind the mess. In fact, she couldn't be more pleased with her budding students.

"It's okay to get dirty," Dixon said. "I want them to experience life outside."

Dixon, Coordinator and Head Teacher of the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum Young Naturalist Pre-School Program, has designed a program to get parents and caregivers off the sofa and into the sunshine. In a series of interactive workshops, Dixon plans to support the community, helping with the challenges of raising young children in today's society. Some of those challenges include losing a connection to the natural world, possibly affecting the mental, physical and spiritual health of the youngest generation. And Dixon, a resident of Rock Tavern, has watched the connection with nature deteriorate during her 10 years teaching at the nature museum. Even young children are showing signs of Nature Deficit Disorder.

"Younger and younger kids are watching videos at home and in the car," Dixon said. "Some kids are tentative and hesitant to go outside. They're even afraid to make mud pies. I think it's been getting worse, over time."

Dixon encourages people to reconnect and act natural, unchained from the grips of modern consumerism. If you're game to establish a natural habit like her students, you can refresh your own outings. On your next escape, leave a few things behind: your cell phone, BlackBerry, GameBoy, iPod, or portable DVD player. If you want to set the tone for yourself, your kids or grandkids, to reconnect and combat Nature Deficit Disorder, unplug your world and move on out to rediscover the joys and benefits of nature.

Often the case in modern life, our feet barely touch concrete sidewalks, much less wooded hills and green meadows. We jump into the car and race to claim the parking spot closest to a store, school or restaurant. In the end, we

lose a few healthy strides of walking and the freedom of smelling the autumn air or hearing the sounds of footsteps crunching fallen leaves.

And instead of running around outside, climbing trees, playing hopscotch or one of Dixon's favorites, making mud pies, young children are reaching for the remote control—surrounded with the comforts of home, but blocking out Mother Nature.



Sonya Cubberley, whose daughter is enrolled in Dixon's pre-school classes, says she faces the challenges of the modern world with her children. "My kids are plugged in," Cubberley said, "but I'm constantly trying to take them outside to be interactive."

Cubberley knows how to connect with nature and works to keep a balance in her family schedule, but appreciates the additional natural influences her daughter receives at school.

"The other day, Sandy sent a seed home for the children to plant," she said. "While we planted it in the back yard, my daughter talked about how the seed needed dirt, water and sun to grow. I think this program is phenomenal. It opens their minds to new experiences."

Dixon knows that for some people, they must make a gradual transition, to simply sit, wonder and appreciate nature. That may be the first step in reconnecting.

"I've seen some kids who haven't even taken a walk outside," Dixon said. "They haven't walked on rocks or walked over sticks. I do my teaching outdoors, as much as possible. By the time they leave our program, they notice every little thing."

Dixon's workshop series includes the program, "Combating Nature Deficit Disorder in Our Children: Learn how to help your family reconnect with nature." The program will be held at 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, November 14, at the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum Outdoor Discovery Center, 20 Kenridge Farm Drive, Cornwall. Members, \$2; non-members, \$5. Registration requested. Call 845-534-5506, X204.