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THE NATURAL DISCOVERY: FOR FAMILY ENRICHMENT AND RELIEF OF STRESS

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ABSTRACT

In a world of family deterioration and unrelieved stress, activities are needed which promote togetherness and relaxation. Nature study and outdoor discovery programs lend themselves well as stress-reducing and family-enriching activities. Natural Discovery activities may take the form of hiking, gardening, trail building, animal tracking, meditation, or cloud watching; as many options exist as stars in the night sky.

Keys to family enrichment include taking responsibility, finding inherent rewards, and individual discovery. Keys to stress relief include changing one's environment, exercising, and involvement in worthy endeavors. Not only do Natural Discovery activities contain all six keys, they are easily adaptable for all ages, abilities, incomes, interests, and schedules.

THE NATURAL DISCOVERY: FOR FAMILY ENRICHMENT AND RELIEF OF STRESS

Today, a crucial need exists for stress-reducing and family-enriching programs. Research studies tell us stress is rampant, producing physical and mental damage, i.e., high blood pressure, psychological counseling, heart attack (7, 23, 26), and family bonds are weakening, i.e., high divorce rate, inadequate childcare, working parents, and youth health problems. (12, 14)

Nature study and outdoor discovery programs lend themselves well as stress-reducing and family-enriching activities. This article serves as an introduction to The Natural Discovery, a series of programming ideas utilizing nature study and outdoor discovery for individuals under stress and families needing enrichment and communication. Main concepts include:

- I) The Changing American Family
- II) Stress In Our Society
- III) Why Nature Study And Outdoor Discovery

IV) The Natural Discovery For Family Enrichment

V) The Natural Discovery For Stress Relief

As a vehicle for implementing such programs, the field of recreation and leisure services has great impact on quality of life of our population. Approximately 7.6% of the average U.S. income is spent on recreation, (over \$300 billion per year) even when our economy is experiencing a depressed economic cycle.(2) More than 26 million youth are currently involved in youth-serving agencies, with 64 million boys in Boy Scouts alone over the past 70 years.(3) Professionals in recreation and leisure services or individuals may use the concepts both for programmed activity and to provide direction for self-motivated activity.

THE CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILY

Nearly half of the recent marriages in this country will end in divorce if current patterns continue.(20) More than 13 million divorced Americans today have lived through times of turmoil and trauma and over 14 million American children (23 percent) live in single-parent households. The structure of the family has changed with less than 7% of the population as "mom at home, dad working, and two kids." In 1990, the U. S. Census will have three new family member classifications. A recent cartoon depicted a gentleman knocking at a door with a briefcase entitled "1990 Census." He greeted the young boy with the following "Good afternoon may I speak to your mother, father, step-mother, step-father, male guardian, female guardian, supporting grandparent, supporting sibling, adoptive parent, or whoever makes you eat your vegetables?"

Due to the changing structure of families, over seven million U. S. children are "latch-key kids," that is when they come home from school, there is no parent to greet them.(21) Some researchers view this lack of supervision and "time together as a family" as explanation for a record low in youth fitness.(11)

American Family: Latch-Key Kids

With roughly 70% of mothers in the work force, their children often stay inside for protection until dinnertime. Few people question that unsupervised children are likely to watch more television. According to a 1988 report on television, American children average 25 1/2 hours glued to the television set each week.(24) Spread over the course of a year, that's as much time as children spend in school. From where do such habits stem? American adults average 50 hours per week on spectator activities with TV accounting for half of that.(9)

Researchers from Tufts University School of Medicine have linked childhood obesity to TV addiction.(14) Logic behind this theory not only includes the lack of physical activity which accompanies television

watching, but inaccurate messages presented in commercials. Children see more than 11,000 low-nutrition junk food ads over the course of a year with 95% of the characters being thin or of average weight. Percentages do not correspond to real life, but the message received is "You can eat anything you want to and not get fat".(14, p. 118)

American Family: Youth Fitness

In 1985, the National Children and Youth Fitness Study (NCYFS) was released.(11) As a result, youth were found to be a record high in body fat content and a record low in fitness.

In a society revolving around electronic games, television, and video, parents, educators, and recreators have failed to imbue the belief that lifelong fitness is an integral part of being healthy. Kids who "won't go out and play" aren't the only ones at fault. Adults have doomed them to a lifetime of sloth by saying that winning is the purpose of an athletic event. By high school, 90% have assumed the role of spectator, cheering for the physically-gifted kids from the sidelines.(1)

Sport psychologist Keith Henschen believes that role models are especially important for children, yet, "the average kid sees his parents cemented to the couch growing fatter and fatter, while the most important thing they could be doing is showing him how to kick a ball or going swimming with him".(1, p. 34)

STRESS IN SOCIETY

Stress is the body's physical, mental, and chemical reaction to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, challenge, surprise, anger, endanger, or irritate.(10) Stress can be positive, eustress, stemming from happy events, or negative, distress.(26) Within the last decade, much documentation has connected the negative form of stress (distress) with the development of physical and mental illness. Many studies have been done among executives, but newer research finds executives are not the only group under tremendous pressure. Parents, teenagers, clerical workers, production workers, and middle managers all seem to experience excessive distress particular to their duties and environment.(12)

Stress is a natural physical "fight or flight" response. Years ago, tigers brought on such a response and hunters needed every bit of physical arousal to fight. Today, with few "real" tigers to actually fight, there is no outlet for distress and the response may either result in destructive actions or remain unrelieved causing the following physical and emotional symptoms. Physical symptoms of stress are:

- 1) Increased heart rate and blood pressure.
- 2) Increased retention of salt.
- 3) Changes in the gastrointestinal system.
- 4) Increased muscle tension.

Emotional symptoms of unrelieved stress are:

- 1) Anxiety.
- 2) Depression.
- 3) Fatigue
- 4) Loss of interest or enthusiasm.
- 5) Irritability.
- 6) Moodiness.
- 7) Emotional outbursts.

Health consequences of unrelieved stress are:

- 1) Stroke, coronary artery disease, vascular headaches.
- 2) Pain in back and neck, eye fatigue, muscle spasms.
- 3) Upset stomach, ulcers, inflammation of the pancreas.
- 4) Skin rash, eczema, acne, hives.
- 5) Amennorrhoea, impotence.
- 6) Insomnia, hyperventilation, eating disorders.
- 7) Excessive drinking, smoking, use of drugs, restlessness, and nervousness. (12)

Simply surviving today is practically impossible without stress. According to 1986 estimates, the annual cost of stress in the U. S. exceeds \$100 billion, a direct result of health care costs, lost productivity, and absenteeism. (16)

Summary

More than latch-key kids, television addiction, fitness deterioration, escalating divorces, high blood pressure, tension headaches, sweaty palms, and drug addiction have resulted from the changing family and stress in society. The vicious circle has no specific beginning, but can start at any point of breakdown and literally snowball. So-called "coping methods" of alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating, and smoking only add to the problem.

And yet, as this is written, a 20-year trend has recently reversed: The number of family households grew faster than the number of non-family households between 1986 and 1987 (28), possibly due to the aging of the baby-boom generation as well as the AIDS scare. Some observers are predicting a return of the family. "Family priorities" was a topic discussed in a recent speech given during National Volunteer Week with the emphasis way from self and towards family. "Come every thirty years or so, people turn from private interests to public concerns and begin to 'give themselves away'". (5) Time, Newsweek, and The New York Times have headlines stating, "The Return to Compassion" or "The Need to Feel Needed." USA Today noted a backlash to the get-ahead lifestyle and the "return to the good life" and family priorities. "To strengthen the American Family is to strengthen America". (17, p. 573)

There exists much documentation on increased awareness of the importance of family recreation. Individuals with creative ideas need to get started! Psychologist Alberta Seigel says we have twenty years to

save civilization, the time it takes to raise a generation. Let's start with some practical ideas.

WHY NATURE STUDY AND OUTDOOR DISCOVERY?

"When the world wearies and society does not satisfy, there is always the garden." (Anonymous)

There is nothing terribly academic about nature study rather something delightfully simple and wonderfully profound. Natural wonders, discovered as a family, strengthen bonds and give rise to indelible memories. A parent finally has the time to listen to a six-year-old's "stream of consciousness" as they picnic along a creek bed where phones don't ring nor computers beckon.

A common ground exists in the outdoors, resulting in ease of discussions for families or groups. In the tranquility and peace of a natural setting, it is difficult to debate, yet discussions of problems and personal issues occur as does acknowledgement of the beauty, seasons, and symbiosis of all things in nature.

Nature provides an escape from the noise and stress of workplace and affords the pleasure of "being still." Reflection upon forces of creation and interrelatedness of nature tends to reduce problems or pressures, and usually has a humbling effect. Large bodies of water have lulled poets, writers, and nature lovers to high levels of thought. In waves, there is order and consistency, as in seasons of the year and tides of the moon. Order and consistency, desirable virtues in a social world of disorder and prejudice, may be just what stressed individuals and families need.

Here are a few guidelines to follow while implementing the Natural Discovery ideas:

- A. Lesson or objectives? Relationship to chosen site?
- B. Time of day, season, temperature, insect life/comfort?
- C. Age, ability, knowledge, and interest of all involved?
- D. Acoustics, lay-out of the area, visibility, and possible "hands on" experiences?
- E. The setting:
 - a. Draw attention immediately to the particular place and state brief history.
 - b. Don't always let "bad weather" cancel plans; there is wonder in raindrops and snowflakes!
 - c. Backyards may be perfect--you won't ALWAYS have a seaside, mountain range, and eagle nests.
 - d. Let the silence speak for itself after a SHORT activity, talk, lesson, thought or song.

THE NATURAL DISCOVERY FOR FAMILY ENRICHMENT

There are numerous ways to enrich family ties. Three of the most common are: allow each family member to be responsible for something, let rewards be inherent in the activity chosen, and discover things TOGETHER.

Responsibility

"A Vital Piece Of The Big Picture"

One of the keys to success in raising children is to give them a "job" early in life. In a 40-year study at Harvard, adults who worked and held responsibilities as children were twice as likely to have warm relationships, five times as likely to be well paid, and 16 times less likely to have been significantly unemployed as compared with those who did not have part-time jobs or household chores.(18)

Family hikes and camping trips are excellent places to allocate responsibilities. By including children in the planning of activities, their lives are enriched by the introduction to a new environment.(6) Preparing snacks, packing out garbage, sweeping the tent, packing gear, all add to the "ownership" children feel when they are truly a part of the planning process. "Even our three-year-old could wash dishes because it didn't make any difference if she dropped the metal plate".(18)

Children should not be rushed into jobs beyond their skills. The job should challenge, yet offer a feeling of accomplishment. Children of any given age have widely varying capabilities in the outdoors, but those capabilities are more closely related to their parent's attitudes and experience than any other factor.(6) In an article about family stress, healthy families were reported to "divvy up household responsibilities".(4, p. 176) If it is made clear at an early age that a home is a cooperative effort, outdoor outings will fit smoothly into life's routines. Children will do their share, thus playing a special and vital role in the "big picture."

Activities

A. Allocate responsibilities. Have maps, hiking books, articles, pictures, routes, gear, and meal ideas spread out before you. Allow each family member to choose something to be responsible for in the various hikes, outings, or trips. Take turns being "in charge" of whatever outing you choose. Remember, travel is NOT necessary for an enriching experience. Camping out in the backyard is a great way to begin or drive a mile or two to local/state parks. The night sky also offers interesting food for thought and is very accessible.

B. Choose the activities. Allow one or two members of the group to choose the Natural Discovery activity(s), thus being "in charge" of necessary equipment or teaching resources. Catching critters? Counting new spring wildflowers? Observing types of soil, rock, grasses, or terrain? Noting changes in seasons? Noting habitats of certain animals? Marking off one cubic foot of soil and the number of life forms present? Concentrating on "smells" for the day? Observing decomposition and the interrelatedness of life? Planting a seed in various types of soil? Noting how dew forms and where it comes from? charting the course of an ant? Going on a star night gaze? Searching for sounds of the world at night? Adopting a tree? Viewing things from new perspectives, i.e., lying on the ground and gazing at a 200-foot Ponderosa Pine straight up from the trunk.

Inherent Rewards

"Doing Things Together"

If your family--all two, four or more of you--doesn't come by the active life naturally, take the lead from motivation experts: Make it fun and do it together.(1) Over 3,000 families participated in a questionnaire entitled "Secrets of Strong Families." When 1,500 children were asked "What do you think makes a happy family?" they replied "Doing things together." Working or playing together have resulted in some of the best and closest times.(27)

Specialists agree that dogmatically instituting programs for children just doesn't work. Enforced discipline takes all the spontaneity out of play. Hiking along a stream, going for a swim, feeling the cool breeze on a good bike ride, a family canoe outing, camping trip, picnic, or hike can be fun and exercise oriented as well. Lack of time is the most common excuse for not being fit, according to a Louis Harris poll, but "People who exercise as a family have about 25 hours of leisure time a week, the same as non-exercisers".(19) It comes down to a question of priorities, not time. If the activity is FUN, "time" will come.

Activities

A. What is your very favorite outdoor activity? Find out what each family member truly loves to do. Make a list and begin a one-month planning calendar. Set aside a "together time" on a Sunday afternoon or Saturday morning where each other's "favorite things" can be attempted by the whole family. Don't be surprised to find out how much fun making a texture bark rubbing with chalk and paper, having leaf races down a stream, tree climbing, rock skipping, tadpole catching, kite flying, animal tracking, mud sculpturing, rock collecting, or bird watching can be.

B. What do other families do together? Take a poll of your neighborhood. Find out what the favorite family activities are, why they

are the favorite, and how often they do them. You may be disappointed in some answers, but you may also get other families thinking about how they spend their leisure time.

Discovery Principle

"A frog in the hand is worth five in formaldehyde"

Nature has been used as a tool for teaching and discovery since the beginning of time. When stuck for words, ancient scholars often used analogies of nature to convey deeper aspects of life, i.e., "To see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower . . ." (William Blake). The earth is ancient, yet freshly new, providing constant discoveries and tangible experiences for families. When a child or adult discovers something, the memory is deeply embedded. They have not "been shown" but rather "discovered" and the difference in learning is phenomenal. Nature offers opportunities for all abilities and ages to discover, then teach the wonders to the entire family.

Activities

A. Discover: As a family, take a look at the microcosm of life in the earth and the consistency of the earth. Let each individual plot out a different square foot of yard, garden, or pasture. Take a close look at the variety of life forms. Keep record of changes in varying climate conditions and seasons. Bring in a cup of soil from each plot and each person plant one seed in their cup. Observe the growth of the seed. Compare and contrast the types of soil and the speed of growth.

Teach: A seed represents life in its most compact and efficient form. When the seed leaves the "parent," it prepares for the worst. "Excess water is bailed out, and the tiny embryo pulls itself into a smaller space, as if to husband the flickering spark of life".(8, p. 119) A tough resilient coat develops to shield the seed from outside forces. Internally, the metabolism of the seed s-l-o-w-s down to remain most efficient. Some Indian Lotus seeds from a dry lake bed were found to be 1,000 years old, yet when the tough seed coats were broken open by botanists, germination occurred and a bloom conceived 1,000 years ago awakened in a twentieth century laboratory. The most important ingredient in germination is water. A seed planted in dry soil which remains dry, will not sprout. In tracking the path and growth of a seed, one must look at the total picture of not only soil, but warmth, light, water, and air.

B. Discover: Join hands and go on a "blind hike" where one family member is the discoverer and all the rest are blindfolded. The discoverer leads and must see everything for everyone. To the casual student the earth appears to provide grasses and food as nutrition for animals, but to the real discoverer, the earth is teeming with life.

Teach: The discoverer must tell a tale as descriptively as

possible for all the rest to appreciate the experiences. All senses, i.e., touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, may be used for the best understanding of the immediate environment.

USING THE NATURAL SETTING FOR STRESS RELIEF

There are a number of ways to reduce excessive stress. Three of the most common are: experience a change in one's physical environment, channel pent-up energies towards exercise, and become involved as a member of a group.

Change of Environment

"How will I know . . . unless I go"

Nature study involves a change of environment and a change of pace. For the individual in distress, it affords a special time of quiet, an escape from noise of the workplace, a time to review, to renew, and to replenish. A walk around the block, a quick trip to a city park, a step out the backdoor into the yard will do. Discover something that is not man-made. Bury your face in flowers or pick up a bunch of leaves and toss them into the air. Usually, this is all it takes to make yourself smile and remember what is really important in life.

For those who are not able to experience "the real thing," imagery in stress-reduction bio-feedback tapes is often that of a nature hike. The crunch of autumn leaves, crisp cool breeze, fresh smell of mountain air, invigorating exercise and freedom of movement are visually and mentally experienced. Or the image of a quiet wooded glen with small patches of sunlight streaming through dense branches may be presented. You may gaze with reverence up to the tops of huge pines and then lie down, relaxing, falling asleep on the soft bed of pine needles.

With time being one of the most precious commodities in the world for busy people, "breaks" or "time out" are sometimes difficult to justify, yet here is growing awareness of the costs of stress. The few minutes taken to relax and mentally unwind daily, may help alleviate the billions of dollars lost on medical expenses, lost workdays, and avoidable health problems. (15)

Activities

A. Simply go. Go to a quiet spot as far away from "city sounds" as you possibly can, i.e., a city, county, or state park. Lie down on a blanket, grass, or pine needles. Think of peace and serenity; see the water flowing, leaves falling, or birds overhead; smell the scent of blossoms, pine needles, or fresh air. In your mind, capture the essence of this place. It is a place you can return to whenever you are stressed.

B. Find the largest and fullest green plant you can and purchase it. Bring it with you to your home or office. Allow enough sunshine and water for it to prosper. When feeling stressed, go to the plant. Sit beneath it, if possible. Prune the leaves, water the plant, imagine you live at the base of this rich green oxygen-producing lifeform. Absorb yourself in the plant, the simple life it leads, and the beauty it produces.

Exercise

"In Corporo San Mens Sano" (Sound Body, Sound Mind)

It is stated that children emerge from the womb ready to play and those who see active, playful parents rarely need to be told what to do.(1) For the reluctant child, friend, senior citizen, or teenager, constant support and encouragement from a spouse, a neighbor, or a parent will make exercise a priority. Many of the elderly are the most committed individuals to exercise. The possibility of finding new friends with similar interests exists by visiting the local park, renting a plot in a community garden, organizing a group of workers or friends for daily walks, or joining a nature society, ornithology, or gardening club. If fears about getting lost or falling are present, strength exists in numbers.

WALK to discover the local parks, nature trails, backyards, abandoned roads, stream beds, or flower gardens and explore them. Walking for 20 minutes a day, three times a week has proven to be excellent exercise and a phenomenal stress reliever. Studies have shown individuals involved in some sort of exercise have an improved outlook on their life (25); experience reductions in anxiety (22); improve self-concept (22) and increase emotional stability (13). Along with physical and emotional benefits, decreased absenteeism and increased work performance result when exercise is part of stress management in business.(12)

Activities

A. GO TO or phone the local park department, State Fish and Game agency, or Department of Forestry. Ask if there are maps available for any of the city, state, or county parks, reserves, or wildlife refuges nearby. Inquire about walking trails, degree of difficulty, length, and accessibility and bring home local topographical or geographical maps, ideas, or photos. Begin a Natural Discovery file box with various ideas for different seasons, distances from home, and preparation required.

B. Read up on "Volksmarches" and GO TO or phone the local YMCA, park and recreation department, community college, fitness club, or community center. Inquire about Volksmarches in the area and clubs or organizations which may sponsor them. If there are none, suggest they get started! Walking gets you outside and may branch into neighborhood

activities. Early morning walks are a lovely way to discover the beauty of sunrises, changes in seasons, and add a fresh beginning to each day.

Involvement

"Doubles the joys and halves the sorrows"

Mutual commitment and cooperation are the basis of many successful group endeavors when a worthy goal exists. Cleaning up a river or park, helping to construct a nature trail, clearing railroad ties away for a Rails-to-Trails project, all are honorable goals with more than "their completion" as rewards. Not only is the physical work a much needed outlet for distress, but individuals "feel good" about what they have done and about who they worked with. News media are picking up on the notion that there is a healing power and natural stress relief in the process of cooperation among groups.

Similar principles work in nature study and outdoor discovery. Anton de Bary coined a new word for all of the partnerships found in soil around the 1880's, "symbiosis," which means living together. Though his theory came at a time when "survival of the fittest" was the rage, de Bary brought new attention to the cooperative patterns of living things. In the soil lies the greatest living example of symbiosis on our planet. "If there is any secret to survival on the part of the beings underfoot, it may lie in the mutual cooperation rather than destruction of other organisms".(8)

Activities

A. Run a short ad in the daily paper asking for volunteers to help clean up a local park. Provide cookies and "I Made A Park's Day" coupon for participants. If only a few show up, don't be upset, rather set out to work your frustrations and anxieties away and your work will reward you.

B. GO TO or phone the local park and recreation agency, city council, outdoor stores, or service organizations. Find out how you can become involved in volunteer work in parks, gardens, arboretums, or wildlife refuges. Make a commitment to help out a nature conservancy or wilderness society. THEN, tell others of your experiences.

SUMMARY

Nature study and outdoor discovery allow a means to stress relief and family enrichment--inspiration to look up and beyond the mundane problems of the "world as we see it" to "the world it should be." The activities are available and affordable. A seashore or mountain range are not necessary to explore and discover. A backyard, local park, stream, or simply the stars in the night sky will do nicely for simple,

yet wonderfully profound natural discoveries.

Through numerous activities including walking, meditation, contemplation, exploring, and discovery in nature, attention is focused on the miracle of growth, ecosystem, and symbiosis in nature and away from problems, pressures, and stress. Family enrichment results when individuals take responsibility, find inherent rewards, and discover things together. Stress relief comes from changing one's environment to a peaceful natural setting, exercising, and becoming involved in worthy endeavors.

A place for rest, solitude, sorting out one's mind, and sifting through priorities; a place to forget what the neighbors have that you don't and wander through with no thoughts in the mind. A place to sit, sleep, or talk. A place to hike, climb, or photograph. A short walk or drive to a park or other natural setting will provide an escape to another world with order, consistency, and total acceptance. With a little patience and absorption into a new environment, indelible family memories will enable a fresh start in relationships and stress will evaporate as quickly and silently as morning dew.

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