

**Addressing the Importance of Significant Life Experiences:
Designing a Parenting Program to Reconnect Families to Nature**

by

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Spring 2016

A project completed in partial fulfillment of the
Master of Science in Natural Resources.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Today, the three major environmental challenges of our time are climate change, the biodiversity collapse, and the disconnect between children and nature.”

—Richard Louv, July 2013

Statement of Problem

Identify barriers to families spending time outdoors with their children, and develop a specially designed parenting program that is focused on increasing the amount of time families and children spend outside in nature.

Importance of Study

Today’s culture of “more” has put families under extreme pressure as they struggle to cope with the issues of excess consumption, marketing to children, increased use of screen devices, the strong influence of the media, over-scheduling, strong emphasis on structured “learning opportunities” at an early age, and the devaluing of free play. These issues not only cause a barrier to connecting children with nature, but also have a profound impact on the health of children, families, communities, and the planet.

Children’s disconnect not only has an impact on their own emotional and physical wellbeing, but also leads to a loss of curiosity about and interest in protecting the natural world (Louv, 2005). Tanner (1980), Palmer (1993) and Chawla (1999) all write about the importance of life experiences in nature and positive childhood role models in the development of an appreciation of nature. How many parents today are providing outdoor experiences and positive role modeling for their children? Unfortunately, children today are experiencing very different childhoods than generations past due to a wide variety of reasons, such as proliferation of screen devices, high value placed on adult-led, organized activities, parental fear, and the growing value of stuff over experience due to increased impact of advertising and marketing. Adding to this is the stress and exhaustion of today’s parents who are working longer hours and keeping busier schedules, which makes it more and more difficult for them to encourage their children to go outside to play, or to get outside together as a family.

Considering the growing strain our overconsumption is having on the ecosystem services that sustain life on our planet, we need to rapidly shift how we are living on this planet and increase the protection and preservation of natural lands across the globe. How do we make this shift when people are too busy or too disconnected to care? How

do we build the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to empower people to make impactful changes in their lives? Simplicity Parenting, in concert with formal and nonformal environmental education, could be an effective venue to address these questions and achieve our goal of a more environmentally literate society.

Specific Plan

The plan for this project is to conduct research, and then use the information gained to design a parenting program that provides parents with the knowledge and skills necessary overcome the barriers that keep children from outdoor play. The program will be designed to be utilized by schools, nature centers, and other educational centers.

Parenting program will include:

- Overview of research and importance of significant life experiences within nature
- Parent workbook
- Program assessment tools
- Valuable parent resources

The completed parenting program will be piloted by a small group of parents for feedback and effectiveness through the use of a survey and small group discussion, and will cover the following topics:

- Why simplify? What are the benefits of slowing down family life?
- Transforming the home environment
- Family rituals, rhythms, and celebrations
- Time, creativity and free play
- Technology and the media
- Children and nature

Subproblems

1. Identify barriers that keep families and children from nature.
2. Develop a parenting course based on identified barriers.
3. Pilot the course with small group of parents and collect feedback.
4. Use parent feedback to improve course and determine its effectiveness.

Limitations

- Focus groups and the pilot study will be limited to parents and groups within Anchorage, Alaska.

- Evaluation of a single offering of the course as a pilot cannot completely determine the effectiveness of the program. Ultimately, in the future further study would be needed though multiple offerings in various settings to determine its true effectiveness.
- The program will provide tools for families but cannot predict if parents will actually use those tools while within their homes.

Assumptions

- Respondents will respond to surveys and interviews about program honestly, carefully, and completely.
- Participant responses in Anchorage, Alaska are similar to those in other parts of the country (Singer, Singer, D'agostina & DeLong, 2009).

Definitions

- Media: Methods of communication such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines.
- Nature Deficit Disorder: The disconnect from nature resulting from children (and adults) spending less and less time outside in nature. This disconnection from the natural environment is having a negative impact on childhood development, as well as physical and emotional wellbeing. (Louv, 2005).
- Screen technology: Any technological device that utilizes a screen to transmit information, such as television, video games, computers, iPads and smartphones.
- Screen time: The amount of time spent using screen technology.
- Simplicity Parenting: A process that provides parents with knowledge, skills, and tools to slowly transform their lives through slowing down their schedules, taking the focus off of stuff, adding a calming rhythm to the day, reducing the influence of the media, and finding balance with technology/screen time. (Payne, 2009). Simplicity Parenting is the inspiration for the parenting program, though significant modifications need to be made to the Simplicity Parenting program in order to fully address the barriers to nature play.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Richard Louv, author of the book *Last Child in the Woods*, coined the term “Nature-Deficit Disorder” to describe the growing disconnect between children and nature. The significant decrease in outdoor free play and corresponding disconnect from nature is cause for alarm (Clements, 2004; Louv, 2005). From a loss of significant life experiences that lead to a commitment to responsible environmental action, to the myriad of physical, mental, social, and academic benefits that nature provides for our children, it is critical that we examine the barriers to nature play and devise a means to overcome them.

Importance of Significant Life Experiences

From climate change to habitat destruction and biodiversity collapse, humans face significant environmental challenges that will require innovative solutions and a strong commitment to changing the way we live on our planet. Providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to address environmental issues is the goal of both formal and informal environmental educators across the globe. However, as we continue to develop and implement environmental education programs it is important to note the source of commitment of our environmental leaders so that we may design more effective curricula and programming.

Interviews with environmental leaders by Chawla (1999) examined the sources of their commitment to action. Her study ranked the sources of commitment, with the top five as follows: 1) regular experience in natural areas, 2) family role models, 3) participation in environmental organizations, 4) negative experiences (habitat destruction, pollution of a special place), and 5) educational experiences. It is interesting to note that outdoor experience and family role models ranked highest and environmental education experiences ranked fifth. Chawla states:

“The special places that stood out in memory, where people formed a first bond with the natural world, were always part of the regular rhythm of daily life: the garden or nearby lake or forest where people played as children, the summer cabin or grandparents’ farm that was visited repeatedly in the course of growing up, favorite hiking trails during the university years. In these places, people became comfortable with being out in the natural world....”

She goes on to write:

“For these people who had opportunities to feel happy, free, and engaged in natural areas, family role models drew their attention to what they were experiencing and affirmed its value.”

This does not discount the importance of a strong environmental education program within schools and nature centers—indeed it is more important now than ever. However, considering the important role outdoor experiences and family role models play in the development of environmentally active citizens, environmental educators should be “seeking ways to foster the out-of-school experiences that figure so saliently in environmentally committed people’s memories.” (Chawla, 1999).

Chawla’s study was not the first to reveal the important relationship between outdoor childhood experiences in nature and a commitment to environmental action. In 1980 Tanner studied the impact outdoor experiences have on the development of environmental stewardship values. His study indicated that “youthful experience of the outdoors and relatively pristine environments emerges as a dominant influence.” These experiences, he noted, were positive, occurred nearly on a daily basis, and were not always “prescribed learning activities.”

Palmer (1993) also researched the source of commitment, stating “If a fundamental aim of environmental education is to help children learn about and care for the environment, then those responsible for this subject area must know the types of learning experiences that help to produce active and informed minds.” Her study, continuing the work of Tanner (1980), confirmed his findings that childhood experiences in nature (significant life experiences) are “the single most important factor in developing personal concern for the environment.”

Adult role models were also listed as significant after childhood experiences (Tanner, 1980; Palmer, 1993; Chawla, 1999). Later studies focused on environmentally active youth (Sivek, 2002; Arnold, Cohen & Warner, 2009) also ranked outdoor experiences as the most influential in development of a strong commitment to environmental action and environmental sensitivity. However, they noted an increase in the influence of adult role models. While the earlier studies noted the significance of a family member (Chawla, 1999), the more recent studies indicate that teachers, peers, and extracurricular activities are having a greater influence on the development of environmental attitudes

and sensitivities within children. This may be due, in part, to developmental changes that occur throughout adolescence. (Arnold, Cohen & Warner, 2009).

Another influence on the significance of role models stems from the most recent American Time Use Study Summary. According to the 2014 report, parents spend an average of 1-2 hours per day caring for children (amount of time dependent on age of child). However, when examining the breakdown of that time (table 9 in the report), parents are only spending an average of 3-4 minutes per day in conversation with their children. This is not too surprising when you consider the increasing impact screen devices have on reduced family interaction. (Chard, 2015). Thus, this lack of parent-child communication puts both a greater importance on the role of teacher as being a positive role model, as well as suggesting that we work to reconnect parents and children within nature.

Since Tanner (1980) there have been multiple studies that confirmed his hypothesis that children must first be connected to, and learn to love the natural world before they can grow to become environmental stewards that care for the land. This raises the question: how do we create these formative outdoor experiences for children?

“Seventy-five percent of our children are growing up in urban and suburban environments, most of them apparently quite removed from the world of nature. Thus, the implications of this study for further research and for educational practice are not only numerous—they are urgent.” (Tanner, 1980)

Benefits of Free Play in Nature

There are many other benefits to spending time in nature in addition to environmental stewardship and a commitment to action. When children spend time outside they relax, they learn, their imagination is ignited, as does their sense of creativity and ability to problem solve and resolve conflicts between peers. Children experience reduced anxiety, learn to cooperate with others, and develop empathy for not only their peers, but also other forms of life. (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Additionally, children who spend time outside develop stronger cognitive skills by improving awareness, reasoning, and observation skills (Wells, 2000).

In his book *Birthright: People and Nature in the Modern World*, Stephen Kellert explains that children are sensory beings who are naturally attracted to plant and animal life. Experiences outside provide a rich source of sensory stimulation and complexity--so

much more than any book or website could provide. Kellert suggests that time spent outside playing and exploring in the natural environment is crucial for childhood development.

Furthermore, nature provides balance to the ever-increasing use of screen technology. While computers, iPads, and television only use sight and sound, nature provides opportunities to learn and interact with the world using all of their senses. Nature encourages children to engage more fully with the world around them. (Louv, Nov 2013). As Lowell Monke (2004) writes in his article *The Human Touch: In the Rush to Place a Computer on Every Desk, Schools Are Neglecting Intellectual Creativity and Personal Growth*:

"Children come to know a tree by peeling its bark, climbing its branches, sitting under its shade, jumping into its piled-up leaves. Just as important, these firsthand experiences are enveloped by feelings and associations--muscles being used, sun warming the skin, blossoms scenting the air. The computer cannot even approximate any of this."

Finally, the Children and Nature Network, co-founded by author Richard Louv, has published multiple research reports, each listing literature reviews and research studies that discuss the many different social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits of spending time playing and exploring outside. The long list of research indicates that connecting children with nature is not only important for developing a strong commitment to environmental action, but also in the development of a child's health, wellbeing, and sense of self.

"Research indicates that unstructured play in nature increases self-esteem, creativity, motor skills, fitness, and even academic performance. It also seems to relieve symptoms of ADHD." - Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*

Barriers to Nature Play

Despite these many benefits, the amount of time children spend engaged in outdoor play is on the decline (Clements, 2004; Karsten, 2005). The decrease in outdoor play and recreation also extends to the amount of time families are spending in outdoor recreation (Pergams & Zaradic, 2008). There is a myriad of reasons for this. First, is lack of access to natural areas, especially for families within urban areas. (Louv, 2005; Kellert, 2012). To go along with this lack of access is fear--fear of strangers, fear of

children getting hurt, or fear of traffic. For some parents, keeping their children inside is safer and easier. (Louv, 2005).

Richard Louv and Stephen Kellert also mention the lack of parent knowledge about the local environment as a barrier to taking their kids outside. Either they are not sure where to take their children and what to do with them, or perhaps they feel intimidated by having to admit to their child that they do not know much about the local flora and fauna. Parents may also not fully understand the many benefits of free play in nature, which may explain why Stephen Kellert suggests that an emphasis on learning through formal educational environments (classroom and structured activities) is a barrier to time in nature. As formal educational experiences have gained in value, free play in nature has decreased and has become undervalued.

One of the more commonly mentioned barriers is lack of time. Many children are not provided enough free time to play due to too much time spent in organized, adult-led activities and academics. (Clements, 2004; Karsten, 2005; Louv, 2005; Payne, 2009; Kellert 2012). Another facet of not enough time is simply that parents do not have adequate time to encourage their children to go play outside. Many parents are too busy to supervise their children outside, preferring instead to keep them inside where they are then able to get their own work done. (Karsten, 2005; Payne, 2009; Maniella, Agate, & Clark, 2011; Kellert, 2012).

Compounding lack of time is the influence of the media and screen time. Time spent watching TV, playing video games, or on the internet has increased significantly over the past years. According to a report on media use by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2010), the average young person (ages 8-18) spends 7 hours and 38 minutes per day consuming media. However, when you account for multitasking, today's children pack a total of 10 hours, 45 minutes of media use into those 7 and a half hours of daily media use. All that time spent consuming media inside means less time outside. (Clements, 2004; Louv, 2005; Payne, 2009; Maniella, Agate, & Clark, 2011).

When examining the amount of time children spend with electronic media, it is important to consider the impact the corresponding exposure to marketing has on a child's relationship to nature. A recent Federal Trade Commission report found that children are exposed to 25,000 advertisements per year on TV alone, which does not account for advertisements seen on screen devices, billboards, and other locations (Holt,

Ippolito, Desrochers, & Kelley, 2007). Marketing exposure not only causes family stress, but it also contributes to children's reduced ability to play creatively (Schor, 2004; Linn 2005). The diminished capacity for children to play creatively is one of top reasons why parents sign their children up for adult-led structured activities or allow them to spend excessive time utilizing screen devices (Payne, 2009). Another problem that stems from excessive marketing to children is the creation of children who are more materialistic (Schor, 2004). This increase of marketing and corresponding materialism of children is disconcerting, for the more people care about extrinsic, materialistic values, the less they care about the surrounding environment and they are less likely to engage in environmentally beneficial behaviors (Kasser, Crompton & Linn, 2010). As Brian Swimme (2001) writes:

"In the propaganda world of the ad, the ideal people—the fully human humans—are relaxed and carefree, drinking Pepsis around a pool, unencumbered by powerful ideas concerning the nature of goodness, undisturbed by visions of suffering that could inspire a commitment to justice. None of that ever appears. In the religion of the ad, the task of civilization is much simpler. The ultimate meaning behind human existence is getting all this stuff. That's paradise. And the meaning of the earth? To provide the raw materials from which to manufacture consumer stuff."

Finally, adding to the impact of marketing and materialism is the growing "museum mentality" towards nature. As more and more educators (and parents) declare "look, but don't touch!" nature loses its ability to compete against flashy toys, computer games, and indoor play. David Sobel, author of *Look, don't touch: The problem with environmental education* (2012), writes:

"Between the ages of six and twelve, children have an innate desire to explore the woods, build forts, make potions from wild berries, dig to China, and each of these activities is an organic, natural way for them to develop environmental values and behaviors. Instead, the "look but don't touch" approach cuts kids off from nature, teaching them that nature is boring and fraught with danger."

Sobel goes on to discuss that many of our well known conservationists (E.O. Wilson, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold) spent many days throughout their childhood digging, climbing, collecting organisms, and exploring. They were allowed to step off the trail and do a bit of damage. In the words of E.O. Wilson:

“Hands-on experience at the critical time, not systematic knowledge, is what counts in the making of a naturalist. Better to be an untutored savage for a while, not to know the names or anatomical detail. Better to spend long stretches of time just searching and dreaming.” —E.O. Wilson

While programs like “Leave No Trace” are important for conservation efforts, it is time that we examine the impact the LNT philosophy is having on preventing our children from connecting with nature—to consider when it is important to leave no trace and when it is ok to step off the trail and go exploring. David Sobel makes two excellent points:

“First, environmental educators need to allow children to be “untutored savages” for a while. Nature programs should invite children to make mud pies, climb trees, catch frogs, paint their faces with charcoal, get their hands dirty and their feet wet. They should be allowed to go off the trail and have fun. Second, environmental educators need to focus way more on hands-on experience with children and way less on systematic knowledge. Or at least understand that systematic knowledge can emerge organically from lots of hands-on experience. Between the ages of six and twelve, learning about nature is less important than simply getting children out into nature.”

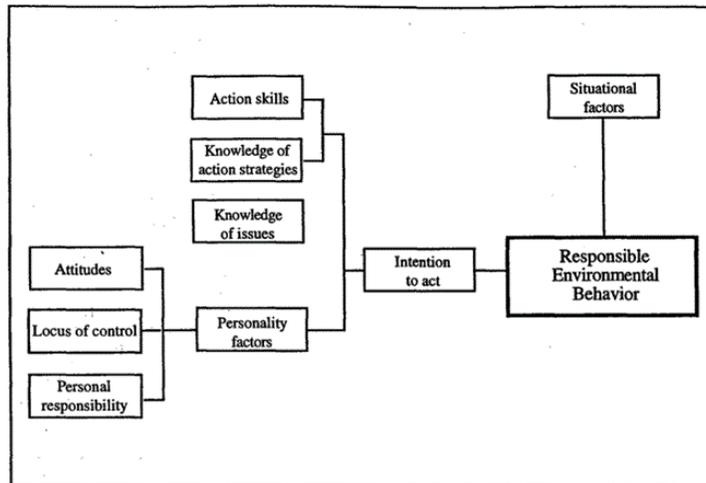
The barriers that keep children from connecting with and playing in nature are varied and complex. Many are dependent on where children live (urban, suburban, rural), as well as their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The barriers included here are noted repeatedly in multiple sources and apply to the broad range of backgrounds.

Changing Behavior

Finally, it is important to consider key variables to changing behaviors when designing a program to help parents overcome the disconnect between children and nature. An examination of the Hines Model of Responsible Environmental Behavior (Hungerford & Volk, 2001) indicates key variables that should be addressed within an environmental education program designed for behavior change. The following variables will be addressed within the parenting program:

- Attitudes: Developing a positive attitude towards the environment
- Locus of Control: Empowering parents to realize that they have the ability to bring about change within their home.

- Personal Responsibility: As parents they are responsible for the health and wellbeing of their children and family.
- Action Skills: Teaching parents the skills to take action and create change.
- Knowledge of Issues: Providing articles, discussion, and journal prompts to deepen their understanding of the issues.
- Intention to Act: Helping parents set intentions and provide them with a community to report back to.



Hines Model of Responsible Environmental Behavior
(Hungerford & Volk, 2001)

By addressing these different variables within the program it is more likely to be successful in bringing about sustainable, long-term change within families.

In Conclusion

Based on the noted research, and considering the current major environmental issues facing society, there is a growing need to design a parenting program that addresses the growing disconnect between children and nature due to the decline in free play in nature. In order to successfully get children back outside parents need to be provided with the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to overcome the many different barriers to nature play, as well as grow to be comfortable in nature themselves and share their appreciation with their children.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Methodology

The focus of this project is to design a parenting program based on noted research. Once the program is completed the next step is to assess program strengths, weaknesses, and potential modifications for improvement. Survey questionnaires and informal group discussion will be used to gather feedback from both parents participating in the pilot study.

Projected Treatment of Each Subproblem

1. Identify barriers that keep families and children from nature.
 - a. Review literature on significant barriers that need to be addressed (February - December 2014)
2. Develop parenting course based on identified barriers.
 - a. Survey existing programs and resources by collecting and reading related books, articles and parenting programming curriculum (see Appendix I for a complete list). Select articles and text based on which provided information and support in a manner that was supportive and empowering. (September 2014 - January 2015)
 - b. Design and write curriculum for parenting program. The core themes included in the parenting course (why simplify, simplifying the home, valuing experiences over stuff, adding rhythm, simplifying schedules, finding balance with technology and reconnecting with nature) were selected based on the work of Kim John Payne and his book Simplicity Parenting, as well as the work of Richard Louv and his book Last Child in the Woods. Both write extensively about their research on the barriers that block connection between parents and children, as well as well as children and nature. It is helpful for parents be connected to their children in order to be an effective role model, as well as to be able to spend quality time together outside. (March - November 2015)
 - c. Send curriculum out for feedback and review. Parent handbook was sent out to 5 colleagues to review. Reviewers included 2 secondary English teachers from the Anchorage School District, a colleague from the Simplicity Parenting training course, a parent with young children (ages 1-6) and a parent with older children (ages 7-14). Reviewers were asked to provide feedback on the following:
 - i. Spelling, grammar and word choice

- ii. Is the text clear and easy to read and understand?
 - iii. How does the voice within the parent handbook feel? Supportive and encouraging? Judgmental? Discouraging? Condescending?
 - iv. Are the readings and questions helpful? Are there holes or gaps in information?
 - v. Is there information that you would add or remove?
 - vi. What other feedback and suggestions do you have?
- d. Make edits based on review and feedback (January 2016)
3. Pilot the parenting course with a small group of parents and collect feedback.
- a. Determine dates, times, and location.
 - i. Gather needed materials for parenting course (December 2015 – January 2016)
 - i. Design flyers, posters, and other advertisements for course (see Appendix II). (December 2015)
 - ii. Determine best days of the week and time of day to hold pilot course for working parents. Course day and time set based on personal availability: Thursday evenings from 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm. (December 2015)
 - iii. Determine potential locations based on accessibility, availability, and room rental costs. (October – December 2015)
 - iv. Reserve space to conduct workshops. (January 2016)
 - b. Submit project proposal to Institutional Review Board (January 2016)
 - c. Advertise and gather parents to participate in pilot parenting workshops.
 - i. Create website (WindingTrailsParenting.com) to provide a source of information about program (February - March 2015)
 - ii. Contact local schools, nature centers, and YMCA with workshop information. (December 2015 – February 2016)
 - iii. Post flyers at area coffee shops, pediatrician offices, nature centers, schools, and stores. (January 2016)
 - iv. Host an informational session for parents. (February 2016)
 - v. Respond to inquiries about workshops from interested parents and professionals. (January –February 2016)
 - d. Determine participating parents' current practices, attitudes, and beliefs surrounding time spent in nature.

- i. Develop a pre-course questionnaire to determine the parents' current practices, attitudes, and beliefs about nature-based activities. Questions address beliefs and attitudes about nature, barriers to spending time outside, and family habits and rhythms (see Appendix III for complete copy of questionnaire) (May - June 2014)
 - ii. Administer questionnaire prior to the start of the Simplicity Parenting workshops. Parents received a paper copy of the questionnaire the week prior to the course via mail. Parents brought completed questionnaire to first meeting and handed it to me at the start. Completed questionnaires were labeled with a false name and stored in a private file with their signed consent form. (February 2016)
- e. Pilot the course with a small group of parents and collect feedback.
- i. Facilitate parenting course with group of 3-8 parents. (February – April 2016)
 - ii. Provide parents with parent handbook, readings, reflection questions and art supplies. A list of recommended readings for parents can be found in Appendix III. (February – April 2016)
 - iii. Parents attend class every other week to provide time implement and practice their small, doable change at home. Individual classes are as follows:
 1. *Why Simplify?* Within this first class we examine the benefits of doing the work of simplifying family life in order to reconnect with each other, as well as introduce the Simplicity Parenting change process. Through the change process parents can transform areas of dissatisfaction within their family life by designing small, sustainable changes to enact at home.
 2. *Transforming the Home Environment:* Within this class parents examine both the impact having too much stuff has on children and families and the benefits of minimizing belongings. This class covers strategies on how to declutter and clear out excessive toys, books, and clothes, and how to take a critical look at cultural pressures, advertising, and marketing.
 3. *Rhythm:* In the third class parents take a look at the daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms within the home. Discussions include a reflection on favorite memories from childhood, family rituals, celebrations, family vacations, creating special family rhythms and rituals, and how to smooth out trouble areas within their days and weeks.
 4. *Time and Scheduling:* This class examines the impact over-scheduling has on children and families. Parents examine their family's typical weekly schedule and discuss the importance of free play and down time on child

development and overall wellbeing. This gathering helps families balance out active and calm days, and as well as how to conduct "boredom training" with children.

5. *Technology and the Media*: Parents examine the impact excessive screen use and media exposure has on children, and then calculate the amount of time their children spend with screen technology. Parents create a technology and media plan that works for their family.
 6. *Children and Nature*: The final class examines the importance regular free time in nature has on a child's health and wellbeing. Parents also spend time discussing common barriers, tips and techniques for taking children outside in all weather, how to incorporate nature into the home (both inside and outside), as well as other useful resources. The gathering concludes with designing ways to incorporate more nature into family life.
- f. Collect feedback from parents at completion of parenting course.
- i. Develop questionnaire to determine the parents' practices, attitudes, and beliefs about nature-based activities following the completion of the course. Questions will also examine parents' intent to continue with learned strategies after the workshop has been completed, which strategies they find to be most effective and helpful, and their suggestions for improvement. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix II. (October 2014)
 - ii. Administer questionnaire at the completion of the parenting course. Parents will be given a copy of the questionnaire at the end of the last course, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Completed questionnaires will be filed in a locked cabinet, labeled with a false name. (April 2016)
4. Use parent feedback to improve course and determine its effectiveness.
- a. Analyze and interpret data from questionnaires and interviews in order to ascertain changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior changes surrounding time spent in nature.
 - b. Analyze and interpret data in order to determine effectiveness and improve upon the program. (April - May 2016)

Chapter Four: Results

The four key subproblems addressed by this project included identification of the barriers that keep families and children from nature, development of a parenting course based on these identified barriers, piloting of the course with a small group of parents, and use of their feedback to improve the course and determine its effectiveness.

Identifying Barriers

Identification of the barriers that keep families and children from nature was conducted primarily through a survey of literature. The results of the literature survey are described within Chapter 2.

Parenting Course Development

The process used to develop the first draft of the parenting course is detailed in Chapter 3. Feedback from the 5 colleagues asked to review the original draft included wording, grammatical, and layout suggestions. These errors were corrected prior to piloting the course. To obtain a copy of the course handbook, along with other curriculum materials, visit the course website at www.windingtrailsparenting.com.

Piloting the Course

After advertising the course online and through the supporting school's PTA and newsletter, there was a total of 4 parents who signed up for the course. The primary challenge was finding parents who were able to commit to attending the six gatherings that were scheduled on Thursday evenings from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. While there was significant interest for the course based on emails from and discussions with parents within the school community, many parents already had other activities scheduled and could not make the time. The complete outline of the course, including an overview of each individual class, can be found in Chapter 3.

Results: Improving Course

Feedback collected through both submitted questionnaires and during individual classes indicated a number of ways to improve the course. First, participants indicated that they did not have the time to read the book, with three of the four participants not reading it at all. The supplemental articles were found to be much more helpful, as they could be read from their phones while waiting for a child during after school pick-up or during evening activities. At the beginning of the course parents forgot to read the articles and suggested that it would be helpful to receive an email during the off week with a

reminder, along with active hyperlinks to suggested articles. Sending emails increased the likelihood that the articles were read prior to the next class.

“I really wish I would have taken more time to read the book. There was great information in the little I read. The articles, however, were a great filler for not reading the book.” -Parent

In addition to forgetting to read the articles, all four parents indicated that on the weeks they were busy they would often forget to attempt the one small, doable change. Their changes were detailed within the parent handbook. When they returned from class they would set down the binder where it would be forgotten until they either received an email reminder from me, or as they were preparing to leave for the next class. To remedy this, one parent suggested:

“Having a visual reminder or list of action items to complete before each class would be helpful.” -Parent

Finally, near the start of every class parents shared which articles resonated the most for them. With each parent being different, and having different needs and challenges, they all responded differently. One mother shared her appreciation of having a variety of articles to choose from on the webpage and emails, as she would only pick the ones that applied to her and her family. She said it helped her when I suggested that she did not need to read everything, but instead read the articles that called to each of them. For parents who simply did not have the time (or forgot) to read the assignments, having the “Quite Simply” section of bulleted highlights was helpful. One parent shared that when she forgot to read she knew she could quickly read through this section and feel somewhat prepared for class. This kept her coming to class each time instead of feeling bad about not doing the work and then skipping the class.

Parent Feedback: Course Improvements
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Send email to parents on off weeks with links to reading assignments, inspirational quotes, and course reminders.2. Have parents create a visual prompt as a reminder of their self-designed small, doable change3. Provide parents with a 1-2 sentence summary of each article4. Develop resources for parents to use once course is completed

Results: Course Effectiveness

To begin, parents indicated that while they were aware of the ever-constant presence of stress and uneasiness with the pace of family life, there was uncertainty about what to do about it. Each indicated that this was the first time they paused to reflect on and evaluate their parenting values and activities as a family. As the course continued, their overall awareness grew about their consumption habits, screen-use habits, free time and time spent outside.

"Now I look at the dollar section at Target much differently. Instead of seeing a cheap toy that'll provide temporary entertainment, I now see one more piece of plastic that creates clutter and will most likely end up in the trash in a few short days. Feels so wasteful." –Parent

"I felt the classes gave me the time to assess my family life and figure out how to change it. I'm not sure I would have ever allowed myself that time. Now I know it is ok to stop and spend time to make these important changes. And know life is a cycle that requires regular attention to make it work." -Parent

Questionnaires indicated there was an increase of 1-4 hours/week in free play and outdoor play, as well as a similar reduction in screen time. It should be noted that the return of spring weather at the end of the course may have influenced the increase of free and outdoor play. However, with the changes came an increase in overall awareness about the need for and benefits of simplification. This suggests that the increased awareness may have played a role in the increase of outdoor and free play, as well as a decrease in screen time.

One of the more impactful exercises that took place during the course was taking a critical look at their family's daily rhythms and weekly schedules. Sketching out daily and weekly schedules provided an opportunity to reprioritize how they spent their time as a family. Consistently rough times of the day, such as dinner time and bedtime, were smoothed out. Also, reevaluating scheduled activities provided more free time on the weekends for free time and outdoor play. One family decided to make Sundays their adventure day, a day when they would ignore email and housework and instead spend a day at the museum, hiking, exploring, or playing a game together in the backyard. By

taking the time to evaluate how they spend their time, parents were able to work towards overcoming a common barrier of outdoor play: not enough time.

When asked about the greatest benefits and most significant changes that took place in their home, parents responded with:

“Getting our home in order. This make things more relaxed and gave us more time for enjoying each other.”

“Having more time to spend on unscheduled things.”

“Holding strict screen time was tough at first, but now kids don’t question it. They’re playing outside more now too.”

“My children having more time to be kids and the reduced stress in our lives.”

“Easier family schedule and rhythm, and to be patient with myself. The realization that “things” are not as important.”

Overall, parents found the small changes that they made at home to be helpful. However, during the final class each shared with me that they felt that they had just scratched the surface and asked if we could continue meeting as a group. The course had created a desire to make further changes and they felt they would be more successful in a group setting versus doing it on their own. One mother reported that she had been sharing the lessons and activities with a close friend who was interested in joining the group if it continued.

“For some time now I've had a growing sense of unease. I felt the pull to make changes so we weren't always so busy and stressed. But I didn't know where to begin. It helps having a group to bounce ideas off of, share what is working, and talk to people who understand what I'm trying to accomplish.” -Parent

Finally, one unanticipated outcome was watching how over time the newly formed sense of community grew into a sense of collective efficacy. Each parent in the group had school-aged children, and homework was part of the daily battle. Parents lamented about how homework eats up so much free time after school, which was frustrating given that all of the children were in their elementary years. One article, *Why Parents*

Should Not Make Kids Do Homework (see bibliography at end), sparked a discussion about speaking with teachers. One mom said "I didn't realize you could ask your child's teacher to lighten up on homework. I talked with my son's teacher and she was very supportive. Now we have more time after school to play, cook, and do more things together as a family."

A discussion on the impact of giving kids more recess also had a similar impact with the group. There was a sense that together they could talk with school administrators and the school PTA to start bringing positive change at school. Tackling issues such as excessive homework and not enough recess felt too overwhelming on their own. But together as a group they realized they could work together and have the support to create the changes they wanted to see in their school.

As parents got to know each other during the course through sharing stories and experiences, a deeper connection and sense of community developed. This emotional connection strengthened the parents' commitment to making changes within the home (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

While the course itself shows promise in bringing about changes in lifestyle necessary to reconnect kids with nature, it is difficult to make any claims after one small test run of the course.

Conclusions

Based on the research a number of conclusions may be drawn. First, while it is tempting to design a single day workshop for parents who do not have the time to commit to a multi-session course, the high importance participants placed on the ongoing support and accountability suggests that a single workshop would not be nearly as effective.

The need for ongoing group support is in agreement with research that suggests genuine behavior and lifestyle changes require greater support in the development of skills and a deeper sense of self-efficacy. This is more effectively provided by the social learning that takes place within group settings and environmental organizations versus individually (Heimlich & Ardoin, 2008). Participation in the multi-session course, instead of simply reading books and articles or attending a one-day workshop, provides a positive environment for parents to learn and practice skills that bring about positive change within the home (Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007).

Additionally, feedback received from course participants suggests the course was effective in bringing about an increase in awareness, ability and willingness to make changes within their homes. Parents became more mindful of their consumption habits, how they used their time, and recognized the impact reduced screen time has on their children. Parents appreciated having more free time together as a family, and made changes that encouraged more outdoor play time for their children. Based on these results from the piloting of the course it can be concluded that a Simplicity Parenting course can be an effective method of reconnecting families and children to the natural world.

Recommendations

Based on the outcome of the course and the research there are both opportunities for further research, as well as for recommendations for those interested in offering a similar parenting course.

Recommendations for Further Study

1. Consider development of online and self-study courses for parents with support provided through an online community.
2. Work to incorporate parenting workshops into existing family nature and hiking groups where support networks have already been established.
3. Determine the effectiveness of the course with larger and varying socio-economic groups.
4. Examine the seasonal influences on outdoor play and screen use.
5. Track the long-term effectiveness of the course by determining if changes made within the home are maintained well beyond the conclusion of the course.

Recommendations for Parenting Courses

The following recommendations for effective parenting courses are based on the outcomes and feedback gained from the course, along with a survey of the literature.

It's recommended that those offering similar courses should:

1. Meet over a series of weeks to provide ongoing support and encouragement.
2. Provide continued support and communication after course ends. This could be in the form of family nature clubs, monthly family-friendly hikes, discussion meetings, or book groups.
3. Email parents a variety of articles in addition to book and chapter summaries for parents who do not have time to read a full book.
4. Provide a visual prompt to hang in a prominent place at home. The prompt should be self-explanatory, remind parents to act, and illustrate the desired behavior or outcome for their small, doable change.
5. Include a mixture of reflection questions, art exercises, and group discussions.
6. Provide parents with the opportunity to map out their daily and weekly schedules. Allow time for parents to reflect on and make adjustments to their schedules.
7. Be child-free (or have daycare) to provide time for parents to focus and contemplate change without distraction.
8. Provide an ongoing way for parents to continue to support each other and spend time together to ensure lessons and benefits gained by the course continue far beyond the course conclusion.

Considering the current major environmental issues facing society, the need to reconnect children and their families to nature is growing ever more urgent. It appears a Simplicity Parenting course can reduce the barriers to children spending time outside by providing the awareness, knowledge, skills and support necessary for parents to create

positive change within their home. This is valuable for the desire to preserve, protect and restore the environment stems from the connection to the natural world created by frequent outdoor play. Thus, as we seek solutions to complex environmental issues, it is important to incorporate programs that foster deeper relationships between people and nature.

The Simplicity Parenting course includes other important benefits in addition to a healthier, more protected environment. These additional benefits to families include improving their financial situation by reducing their overall consumption, growing healthier and happier as they spend more time together outside, and building a community of families with similar goals and values. Within a supportive community, families can create a future where we live in greater harmony with the natural world and recognize the restorative power time in nature has on our health and wellbeing.

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Appendix I: Books Reviewed on Parenting

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Appendix II: Questionnaires

Preliminary Questionnaire

Simplicity Parenting Questionnaire

Evaluation Questions Addressed

- What components will create a welcoming environment in which parents feel comfortable participating and sharing?
- What changes took place after the completion of each workshop? (*Collection of preliminary data*).

Questionnaire Procedure

1. Once parents have signed up for the Simplicity Parenting course mail them the questionnaire along with the consent letter and a welcome note.
2. Parents should bring completed questionnaires to the first Simplicity Parenting workshop.
3. Create a designated file folder to collect completed questionnaires near the beginning of the workshop. File folders are to use false names and are kept in locked cabinet.
4. Have extra copies of the questionnaire for parents who signed up on site or lost their copy.

Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score

Cover letter

- Reading ease: 68
- Grade level: 6.7

Questionnaire

- Reading ease: 72
- Grade level: 5.8

Simplicity Parenting Questionnaire

Your Name: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for taking 10-15 minutes to answer the questions below. The purpose of this questionnaire is to get to know you better before we begin the course. The information collected from you will also help me to better determine how effective the Simplicity Parenting course is in helping parents bring change into your homes. The information you provide will remain confidential between you and me. It will not be shared with your classmates. Please bring the completed questionnaire to our first meeting.

Your Children

1. How many children do you have? What are their ages?

A Typical Week in Your Family

Circle the answer that best matches a typical week for your family. If there is a difference between your children please describe.

1. How many hours per week do your children spend participating in organized activities and sports (outside of school)?

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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2. How many hours per week does your child spend in free play? (technology-free)

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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3. How many hours per week does your child spend playing outside (outside of school)?

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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4. How many hours per week (outside of school) does your child spend using screen technology (TV, computer, video games, iPads, etc)?

0-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 21 hours
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Participation in Outdoor Activities

How often, on average, does your family participate in the following activities? Place a mark in the box that is the best fit.

Yearly Activities	Never	A few times per year	A few times per month	A few times per week	Almost Daily
Playing outside					
Going for a walk around the neighborhood					
Visiting a nearby park					
Hiking along local trails					

Yearly Activities	Never	A few times per year	A few times per month	A few times per week	Almost Daily
Attending programs at local nature centers and parks					
Other outdoor activities (fill in below):					

Seasonal Activities	Never	A few times per season	A few times per month	A few times per week	Almost Daily
Biking					
Boating/canoeing					
Camping					
Cross country skiing					
Downhill skiing					
Gardening					
Sledding					
Snowshoeing					
Other outdoor activity (fill in below):					

Your Goals for This Course

1. Please rate on the scale below how important the following goals are to you. Place a mark in the box that is the best fit.

Course Goals	Of LOW Importance	Of MEDIUM Importance	Of HIGH Importance
Creating a sense of rhythm and flow to the day (morning, after school, meal time, bedtime)			
Having more time to spend together as a family			
Reducing clutter, such as toys, books, or clothing			
Reducing the amount of time your child spends using screen technology (TV, video games, computer, iPads, etc)			
Your child having more free time for play			
Your child spending more time outside			

2. What do you hope to gain from this course? What is the main reason you enrolled in the course?

3. What are your concerns about participating in this course?

Conclusion

1. How did you hear about the Simplicity Parenting course?

2. What encouraged you to enroll in the course?

3. What else would you like me to know?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. All of your answers will remain confidential. If you have any questions, concerns, comments, or feedback please feel free to call or email me using my contact information below.

Erin M Schneider

Simplicity Parenting Coach

Phone (cell): 262-765-4128

Email: behikers@mac.com

Simplicity Parenting Questionnaire: Course Conclusion

Evaluation Questions Addressed

- What components will create a welcoming environment in which parents feel comfortable participating and sharing?
- What changes took place after the completion of each workshop?

Questionnaire Procedure

1. Give parents the questionnaire and an addressed, stamped envelope at the second to last workshop, "Technology and the Media."
2. Provide parents time at the last workshop to complete questionnaire. Parents may also return the questionnaire via mail with the included envelope.
3. Within the week after the final celebration mail parents a hand-written letter thanking them for their participation.
4. Store final questionnaire within the parent file marked with their designated false name. Store all parent file folders within locked file cabinet.

Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score

Cover letter

- Reading ease: 68
- Grade level: 6.7

Questionnaire

- Reading ease: 72
- Grade level: 5.8

Simplicity Parenting Questionnaire

Your Name: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for taking 10-15 minutes to answer the questions below. The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine the effectiveness of the course, as well as provide feedback for course improvement. The information collected from you will also help me to better determine how effective the Simplicity Parenting course is in helping parents bring change into your homes. The information you provide will remain confidential between you and me. Please return the final questionnaire at the end of the last class, or by mail in the included stamped envelop by Monday, April 25, 2016.

A Typical Week in Your Family

Circle the answer that best matches a typical week for your family after completion of the course. If there is a difference between your children please describe.

1. How many hours per week do your children spend participating in organized activities and sports (outside of school)?

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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2. How many hours per week does your child spend in free play? (technology-free)

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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3. How many hours per week does your child spend playing outside (outside of school)?

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 20 hours
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4. How many hours per week (outside of school) does your child spend using screen technology (TV, computer, video games, iPads, etc)?

0-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	More than 21 hours
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Participation in Outdoor Activities

Upon completion of the course, how often, on average, does your family participate in the following activities? Place a mark in the box that is the best fit.

Yearly Activities	Never	A few times per year	A few times per month	A few times per week	Almost Daily
Playing outside					
Going for a walk around the neighborhood					
Visiting a nearby park					
Hiking along local trails					
Attending programs at local nature centers and parks					
Other outdoor activities (fill in below):					

Seasonal Activities	Never	A few times per season	A few times per month	A few times per week	Almost Daily
Biking					
Boating/canoeing					
Camping					
Cross country skiing					
Downhill skiing					
Gardening					
Sledding					
Snowshoeing					
Other outdoor activity (fill in below):					

Your Goals for This Course

1. Please rate on the scale below how well you feel the course addressed the following goals and helped you create change within your home. Place a mark in the box that is the best fit.

Course Goals	Very Little Change	Some Change	Significant Change
Creating a sense of rhythm and flow to the day (morning, after school, meal time, bedtime)			
Having more time to spend together as a family			

Course Goals	Very Little Change	Some Change	Significant Change
Reducing clutter, such as toys, books or clothing			
Reducing the amount of time your child spends using screen technology (TV, video games, computer, iPads, etc)			
Your child having more free time for play			
Your child spending more time outside			

2. Overall, what were the most significant changes that took place within your family?

3. Overall, which changes brought about the greatest benefits to your family?

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