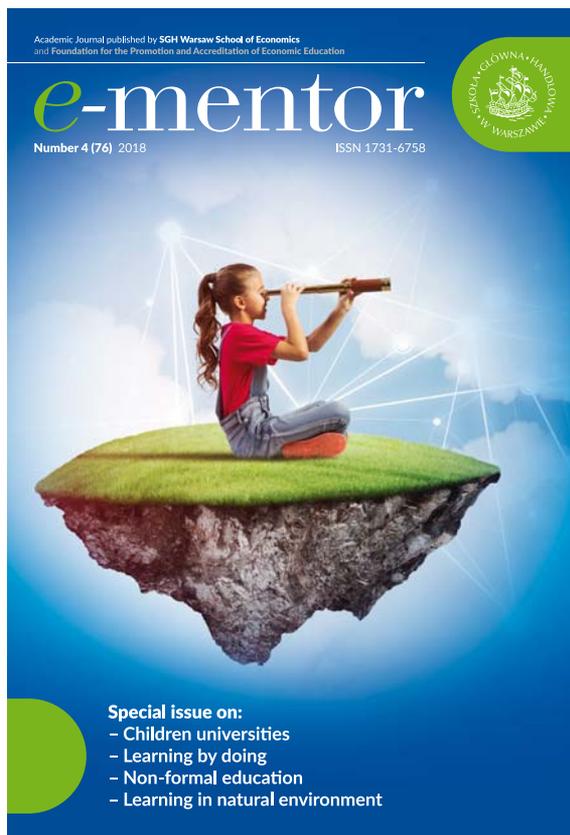


# e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE  
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJI KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

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## Forest School – a forest playground as a remedy for nature-deficit disorder in children

Anna Komorowska\*

*Children need contact with nature for their proper development. This one sentence can summarize the 434-page book by Richard Louv 'The Last Child in the Woods' (Louv, 2014). The phrase 'nature-deficit disorder' that he has proposed is not an official medical term, but it became an object of discussion at conferences and in publications around the world. Based on the results of research, Louv has proved that without being in nature children show symptoms of physical and mental disorders. Simultaneously, one may observe that their opportunities to play in nature are continuously decreasing. For various reasons, parents and teachers forgo to organize trips to the forest or other wild nature places. Richard Louv and his followers have not only defined the theory of this phenomenon but also try to find adequate solutions to this escalating problem.*

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### What is the nature-deficit disorder?

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The solution that may prevent the 'nature-deficit disorder' seems very easy – it can be, for instance, a walk to the forest. However, nowadays, the simplest solution turns out to be not so simple. First of all, children do not have time for going outside. Their daily schedule is packed to capacity with lessons and additional classes. Parents are afraid that if their children just play after school, they will stay behind their peers in learning. As Carl Honoré says in the book *Pod presją* (Honoré, 2011), this 'rat race' begins in kindergarten. The only way to be free from this pressure is to realize that such race does not bring anything good. Thankfully, there are people who become aware of it. In Scandinavian countries, overloading children with excessive amounts of classes is not welcome. Children should have time to play with their families or friends after school. If parents sign them for extra classes and make them learn – the school intervenes.

Parents' anxiety is another reason preventing children to spend time in the forest. What used to be a common walk in the forest, now seems a danger-

ous trip. There are several reasons for such fear. The children may be bitten by ticks. Climbing up the trees may cause broken limbs. Sticks used for play may lead to gouging out an eye. All these are the real risks that should always be concerned. But nowadays they are so overblown that many parents are too afraid to go for a walk to the forest.

Children who spend time inside, 'glued' to the computer or a mobile screen, start to treat the natural environment as an unfriendly place, and moreover – a boring one. A short trip to the forest does not provide such intense experiences as a computer game. Besides, for older children a walk with parents may not be attractive. They need both the companions and challenges. Parents who are aware of the importance of spending time in nature, face a difficult task – how to encourage their children to go outside.

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### There is strength in numbers or good practices of 'Wielki Zachwyt' ('Great Delight')

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Barbara Zamożniewicz, the author of the 'Wielki Zachwyt' blog<sup>1</sup>, knows the problem from her experience. Even though the forest walks were common practice for her family, one day her older son has rebelled. He was reluctant when parents offered him to go outside. Meetings with other families proved to be a good solution. The boy just needed company of his peers. That led to the conclusion – meetings with other people are also more motivating for parents. When we are going to walk on our own, dropping the idea of an excursion because of bad weather or ordinary laziness is quite easy. It becomes more difficult when we have an appointment with several other families.

Richard Louv also encourages to meet in groups. His foundation 'Children&Nature Network'<sup>2</sup> has cre-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wielkizachwyt.pl/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.childrenandnature.org/>

ated the 'Nature Families' program, which promotes family nature clubs. They unite parents who want to bring up children by living close to nature. Families organize trips to the forest or park together. Thanks to that, children have company of their peers whereas parents meet people thinking in a similar way. The Foundation has published a guide *Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit*<sup>3</sup>. It includes helpful tips concerning the organization of the club meetings such as checklists, drafts of announcements and opinions of families meeting in the clubs. The Spanish, French, and Chinese versions of the guide are also available. The work on its Polish edition is ongoing as well.

The meetings under the common name 'Wielki Zachwyt' inspire other parents and the idea began to spread out slowly. Barbara Zamożniewicz has written an article with the intent to help others to initiate similar groups in their neighborhood. She advises what is really important when planning this type of meetings. First of all, openness – inviting other, sometimes totally unknown people, we should take into consideration that they may be very different from us and therefore we should prepare ourselves to accept them. Moreover, we often realize that these differences are only apparent. Actually, their approach to life, nature, and education may be very similar to ours. The second important element is a regularity, in other words, establishing one firm date for meetings (e.g., the first Sunday of the month). And here comes another issue – consequence concerning previously made decisions. Usually, it means that we should avoid canceling the meetings without an important reason, just because of our laziness or less favorable weather conditions. A significant element that distinguishes 'Wielki Zachwyt' from other more formal initiatives is the lack of program. For people of 'Wielki Zachwyt' more important than learning is meeting and spending time together in nature. There is no guide, no teacher

or animator. Children autonomously decide what they are going to do. So, they take a large dose of 'vitamin N' (Louv, 2014) and have time to play which is quite rare in their overloaded schedules.

### **Walking with a guide – trips organized by the Foundation 'Dzieci w Naturę' ('Children into Nature')**

However, sometimes the help of a guide (an animator) is needed. Parents may be afraid that they do not have enough competence or creativity to organize educational walks. Sometimes they are also not sure if their motivation is strong enough to encourage their children and themselves to go outside regularly. They often have no time or willingness to look for other families eager to meet and walk together. An organized event, guiding by someone who has proper competences and skills, seems to be a better solution for them.

The foundation 'Dzieci w Naturę'<sup>4</sup> exists since 2018. But its founders have started family educational walks a year earlier, as part of the project 'Oswajamy przyrodę miasta i okolic'<sup>5</sup> (transl. 'We tame the nature of the city and the surrounding area'), run by a Cracow organization called 'Ruch Ekologiczny św. Franciszka z Asyżu' (transl. 'Ecological Movement of St. Francis of Assisi'). The walks are organized on summer and autumn weekends to urban forests, on the fields, and wastelands – wildly overgrown places unknown even to the citizens of Cracow. One of the goals of the foundation is to show such micro-worlds that are often forgotten or overlooked, despite being close to our place of residence. When being in nature is perceived as big expedition the organization of which requires time and skills, it is highly likely, that eventually it will be abandoned. The Foundation offers micro-trips, i.e.,

**Figure 1. 'Great Delight' of mud**



Source: Author's own materials.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/NCFF\\_En\\_2014.pdf](https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/NCFF_En_2014.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dzieciwnature.pl/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.swietostworzenia.pl/nasze-dzialania/przyroda-miasta>

short walks – lasting two or three hours – to places located in Cracow, which can be reached by public transport.

During these walks, the participants may observe plants, animals, or insects and the guide describes them in a place they are at a given moment. Because nature is changing all the time, the same area looks entirely different in spring than after the first frost. Thanks to this considerable diversity of nature, the same places can be discovered all over again. These walks usually end with a picnic. Their integrating role both for children and adults is significant. Even more, having time for eating and resting before coming back home is also a good idea.

It is worth to notice, that although there is a person who conducts the walks, they should not resemble extracurricular classes. If children are more willing to play in a stream than listen to the guide, they can do it freely. According to the Foundation, making children attentive may have an adverse effect. Following the explanations could be valuable only when a child is interested in it. Sometimes, it is enough that parents listen to the descriptions, learning this way a lot. They can transfer this knowledge to their children later on when they are ready for it.

Scott D. Sampson in the book *Kalosze pełne kijanek. Jak dzięki rozwijaniu miłości do przyrody wychować kreatywne, odważne i odpowiedzialne dziecko* (the original title: *How to Raise a Wild Child: The Art and Science of Falling in Love with Nature*) emphasizes that the primary goal of educators and teachers is not sharing knowledge but implanting the deep longing for nature (Sampson, 2016, p. 306). Only people who experience nature can love it and only those who love nature can defend it. Children who learn about nature from books and know about the savannas more than about the nearest forest would not defend the Białowieża Forest.

### **A School in the forest – homeschooling education proposed by ‘Szkola Bosych Stóp’ (‘Nature Based Education’)**

Izabela Stefanowska has made similar assumption initiating meetings called ‘Szkola Bosych Stóp’<sup>6</sup>. She lives with her family in a village Koszarawa, close to the forest. Her children use to spend most of their time outside. They play jumping in the stream, balancing on the ropes stretched between the trees, cooking in the ‘mud kitchen’ or molding shapes out of the clay. Sometimes they even spend the night outside in ‘the base,’ build by them from sticks and fabrics. Izabela Stefanowska also invites other families to spend time in that way.

What is ‘Szkola Bosych Stóp’? Those are open meetings for families who decide not to send their children to the traditional school but choose to homeschool instead. However, in this case, despite the name, homeschooling is mostly not done at home. The forest becomes both a place and an inspiration to learn. Playing in the forest supports children in acquiring knowledge not only about nature but also about mathematics, art, and foreign languages, not to mention physical education.

Each meeting of the ‘Szkola Bosych Stóp’ has its leading theme. All participants are expected to prepare their own materials referred to that subject. In that way, children can learn from one another as well as from parents. Children and parents learn by playing games, building models, sewing the costumes, constructing bases, walking in a forest or creating pieces of art using natural materials, available in the forest. There is also time for play. Children decide themselves whether they want to participate in workshops or just play. Izabela Stefanowska is convinced that children listen and learn, even if they seem to be

**Figure 2. A micro-trip**



Source: Author's own materials.

<sup>6</sup> <http://szkolabosychstop.pl>

preoccupied with something else. When they once 'catch the bug,' they want to learn more and ask for additional information. The library of her children, filled with books about nature, is a good illustration of this statement. Her children reach for them very often to check the name of an unknown shrub or bird that they have seen during the day.

'Szkola Bosych Stóp' also organizes so-called 'teatime with English.' A walk in the forest ends with a short picnic. During this walk, all participants should speak or at least try to speak English. Such conversation gives an opportunity to practice English and to assimilate new words used in everyday situations. The initiators of those meetings believe that children will have enough time to learn grammar and Shakespeare later.

**Figure 3. 'Szkola Bosych Stóp'**



Source: Author's own materials.

### **The charm of a story and getting acquainted with nature according to 'Pracownia Edukacji Żywej' ('Laboratory of Living Education')**

Bogdan Ogrodnik and Maja Głowacka the creators of the foundation 'Pracownia Edukacji Żywej',<sup>7</sup> went a step further. They also invite families to the forest. However, they suggest spending there not only a few hours but a few days. Initially, the foundation has organized workshops for schools and kindergartens as well as walks for families. Currently, it offers short trips as a part of the 'Kręgi Leśnych Rodzin' (The Circle of Woods Family) initiative. During the school year there are weekend meetings, and during school holidays – week-long expeditions. The families live in agri-tourism accommodations. Such an approach helps not only go outside but also spend short holidays in nature.

Usually, the organizers who are the educators as well choose one story for a few-day workshop. They look for inspiration in the neighboring forest, then decide on a theme, and all the workshop activities are aligned with it. Every morning, children listen to a fragment of the story and then perform tasks related to it. The participants of the workshops spend most of the day in the forest – wandering or acting in the 'base' made especially for them. They spend time observing the animals – what habits they have, what are their traces, and tracks. Families collect plants to their herbariums or take photos of those which they could not identify. And then, in the afternoon

they study and systematize specimens collected during the trip. For this purpose, they can use keys for plants and animals' identification and watch the collected specimens under the microscope. Moreover, they can create their own 'books' containing compiled and systematized information and findings.

The creators of workshops believe that equally important as learning in nature is entertaining in nature. Therefore, during such meetings, there is always time and opportunity to play. Depending on the season, children have plenty of different activities to choose from. They can climb trees using a climbing harness. They can play splash in the stream. They can pick blackberries or other wild fruits and make bonfires.

**Figure 4. The Circle of Woods Family in Summer**



Source: Author's own materials.

<sup>7</sup> <http://pez.org.pl/>

## Forest School – a forest playground...

And in winter, they can sled or make a snowman. The most important thing is that they have fun spending time in nature. Thanks to that, they can develop a natural curiosity of the world, which is crucial to learn effectively. As the founders of 'Pracownia Edukacji Żywej' emphasize – the relations are more important than knowledge.

### Nature and playing – natural playgrounds

The aforementioned initiatives should be strongly recommended for families as excellent ideas of spending time together. However, one trip a year, of walking in the forest or trekking in the mountains, is not enough for children to fall in love with nature. The 'micro-trips' or meetings of 'woods families' are not organized everywhere. The difficulties that face parents wanting to give their children an opportunity of being in nature have already been mentioned. Is there any other way to make this task easier for them? Natural playgrounds can be somehow the intermediate solution. They are play areas carefully designed in such a way that natural elements preponderate. Plants or their parts are the primary building materials in the well-designed natural playground. Those are not ornamental plants with solely decorative purpose but integral parts of that place providing space and materials for play. An obstacle course made of boulders or cut trunks of a tree as well as the wicker tunnel are simple examples of playground area built using plants (living or non-living). On the other hand, playing by making 'acorn soup' in a 'mud kitchen' is a great illustration of the use of fruit, flowers,

and seeds. It is worth noting as well, that those simple solutions used on natural playgrounds (e.g., slides on the slopes of the hills and ropes spread between poles) could be better tools for practicing balance by climbing and swinging than more sophisticated, and not always aesthetic constructions on traditional playgrounds. The playground's cushioned surface can also be natural and made of materials such as sand, gravel and wood chips. The whole construction creates natural space which is entirely safe and complies with standards established for playgrounds.

Natural playgrounds can to some extent substitute the natural environment. They can easily be situated in the city centers, school, and pre-school gardens or residential areas. Such solution gives parents a sense of security. Children do not meet dangerous animals what is theoretically possible in the forest, but simultaneously they have an opportunity to observe the nature (e.g., insects attracted by flowering plants growing on the playground). Loose elements, such as sticks and stones, stimulate children imagination. They allow rearranging the space according to the children ideas, for instance, by building a base or a shelter. Such games let parents see both that their children have great fun playing with such simple 'toys' and that they are perfectly safe doing it. It is worth to mention that European standard PN-EN 1176<sup>8</sup> regulates the playground safety and it is possible to design all elements of a natural playground to comply with that standard.

It should be emphasized, however, that even the most natural playground cannot replace the natural

**Figure 5. Natural playground in Berlin**



Source: Author's own materials.

<sup>8</sup> This standard is not mandatory, but the land administrator is obliged to ensure safety on the playground. In practice, the standard is treated as *technical knowledge, according to which playgrounds should be designed and build.* (<http://placezabaw.org/info/nadzor-budowlany/32-place-zabaw-ministerstwo-infrastruktury>)

environment but may become a good starting point for the 'wilder' trips. Spending time on a natural playground can help parents to understand that getting the child's clothing muddy is not so much important when compared with the value of enjoying nature. It may also convince them that playing with sticks or climbing trees and boulders does not have to be dangerous. On the other hand, children 'engulfed' by virtual reality have an opportunity to discover that the real world around them may also be fascinating.

### Let us go, play and learn in the forest – final remarks

It is worth to notice that the presented initiatives base on the concept of personal contact with nature. Their founders emphasize that both knowledge and love of natural environment begin with and rely on a deep relationship with it. All actions described in this article, aimed at encouraging to establish this relationship are straightforward – walks, workshops

and family meetings. To organize them one does not need a lot of money or well-developed planning skills. However, three elements are essential: allowing children being with nature, giving them enough time to familiarize with the natural surrounding and keeping the balance between education and play.

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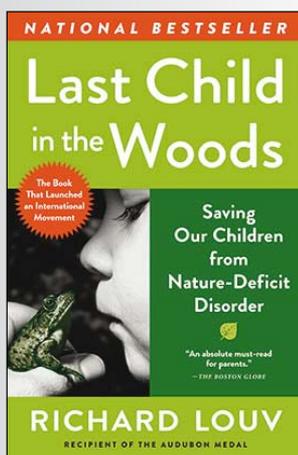
### Abstract

*Researchers alert – children spend less and less time being in nature, which has a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health. As the response to these appeals, such foundations as 'Dzieci w Naturę' or 'Pracownia Edukacji Żywej,' as well as private initiatives like 'Wielki Zachwył' or 'Szkoła Bosych Stóp' appeared. They organize workshops, family walks and trips to the forest giving children an opportunity to play in nature. Natural playgrounds can be an addition to those activities, which in a way 'bring' nature into the cities, residential areas, schools, and kindergartens. In this article, the author presents various examples of good practices that allow children to play in nature.*

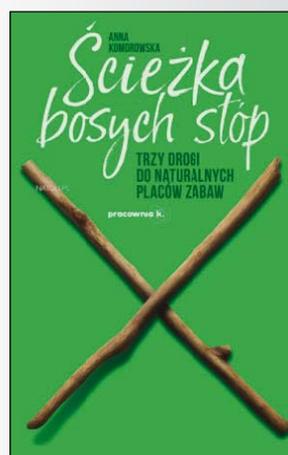
**Key words:** environmental education; nature-deficit disorder; a natural playground; education

Anna Komorowska – a landscape architect, a pedagogue, a journalist, a founder of 'pracownia k.,' the studio specializing in the design of playgrounds and play gardens, the author of the book *Ścieżka Bosych Stóp. Trzy drogi do naturalnych placów zabaw* (transl. The bare feet path. Three ways to natural playgrounds) and numerous articles in the trade press. The author of the blog and the podcast 'Nieplac zabaw' (<https://nieplaczabaw.pl>).

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