In 2006, Richard Louv delivered a keynote address at InterActivity held that year in Boston. He had recently published what would become a landmark book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. In the years since, this award-winning journalist, commentator and activist has authored eight more books, including *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*, and most recently *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life*. Ways to Enrich Your Family’s Health & Happiness. His books, translated into thirteen languages and published in seventeen countries have helped launch an international movement to connect children and their families to nature, which is the focus of an organization which he co-founded and for which he serves as chairman emeritus, Children & Nature Network.

Louv has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Times of London*, *Orion*, *Outside* and other newspapers and magazines. He appears frequently on national radio and television programs, including the *Today Show*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NPR’s Fresh Air*, and often addresses national and international gatherings. In 2010, he delivered the plenary keynote at the national conference of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and in 2012 was keynote speaker at the first White House Summit on Environmental Education.

In 2008, he received the Audubon Medal; past recipients include Rachel Carson, E.O. Wilson and Jimmy Carter. Among other awards, Louv received the 2008 San Diego Zoological Society Conservation Medal, the 2008 George B. Rabb Conservation Medal from the Chicago Zoological Society, the 2009 International Making Cities Livable Jane Jacobs Award, the 2007 Cox Award, Clemson University’s highest honor for “sustained achievement in public service.”

Louv graciously took a break from working on his newest book, which is focused on the evolving relationship between humans and other animals, to respond to questions from the children’s museum field, one of many that have been deeply influenced by his work.

In the eleven years since you delivered the keynote address at InterActivity 2006 in Boston, your message of getting kids back outside and involved with nature has spread within our field—and around the world. Has this message changed or been refined over the years?

Since 2006, I’ve tried to place more emphasis on how we envision the future—long-term. Conservation is no longer enough. To improve our psychological and physical health, our sense of pleasure and happiness, and our ability to learn, we have to transform our cities, yards, homes, and workplaces into incubators of biodiversity.

We’re at a crucial point in what I call the “new nature movement.” Awareness has grown, but we need to move into an action mode, both at the family and community levels. My new book, *Vitamin N*, offers suggestions on how to do this that can be adapted by children’s museums. The Children & Nature Network, a nonprofit organization that grew out of *Last Child in the Woods*, currently has a partnership with the National League of Cities (representing 19,000 mayors and other municipal leaders in the U.S.) to urge mayors to improve opportunities for children and families to connect to nature in
Children’s museums can play a larger role in creating bioregional awareness, directly helping families make real changes in their homes and neighborhood environments.

Technology now dominates almost every aspect of our lives. Technology is not, in itself, the enemy, but our lack of balance is lethal. Time spent in the natural world, whether nearby urban nature or remote wilderness, balances screen time. The more high-tech our lives become, the more nature we need. The ultimate multitasking is to live simultaneously in both the digital and the physical worlds, using computers to maximize our ability to process intellectual data, and natural environments to ignite our senses and accelerate our ability to learn and to feel. People who work and learn in a dominating digital environment expend enormous energy blocking out their human senses to focus narrowly on the screen in front of them. That’s the very definition of being less alive. Who among us wants to be less alive?

In The Nature Principle, I write about what I call “techno-naturalists.” Taking technology with us into nature isn’t new. A fishing rod, a compass, binoculars are examples of technologies used for nature exploration. Today, the family that goes geocaching or wildlife photographing with digital cameras is doing something as legitimate as backpacking; these gadgets offer an excuse to get outside. However, I’m not keen on gadgets that make us more aware of the gadget than of nature—for example, iPod-guided tours of natural areas offer audio information at the cost of the use of many other senses. The litmus test for some of this technology should be how long it takes for someone to look up from the screen, or forget the gadget, and actually experience nature and feel a sense of wonder. Another test is whether the technology prevents other people from fully experiencing nature.

Digital media and social media use among kids has exploded in the past decade, and is unlikely to decrease. Has this focus on digital media affected kids’/families’ interest or involvement in outdoor, unplugged play?

Your book Vitamin N contains more than 500 activities to get kids and families more involved with nature. What are some of your favorite activities that are most effective at increasing that link to nature?

It’s hard to choose, but here are three:

• Encourage and share radical amazement. The great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel encouraged his students to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that took nothing for granted. He wrote, “Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.” To be amazed is more important than the particular information learned. All spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder. Nature is one of a child’s first windows into wonder.

• Select a special place outdoors that you feel nurtures mental health. Find an

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Visit The Run Around at childrensmuseums.blog for the latest news from the children’s museums field. Want to write for us? Contact Alison.Howard@ChildrensMuseums.org.
Several studies show that children who play in natural settings are more cooperative and more likely to create their own games than those who play on flat turf or asphalt playgrounds.

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outdoor spot that you will visit for one month—several times each week, at various times of the day, and in various weather conditions. Find a comfortable spot, sit quietly, and be present in this place for at least a half hour per visit.

• Go on a techno-fast. Too much screen time needs an antidote—stream time works. Research shows that multi-tasking can divide attention and hurt the ability to learn and create. Children and parents need a break. Getting more music, art, yoga, meditation, weight lifting—whatever —into our lives can help. Technology fasting while spending time in the natural world may be the most effective antidote to the downsides of the digital age.

What are the biggest barriers to getting people back into nature?

Throughout history, from the invention of agriculture, to the Industrial Revolution, and through continuing urbanization, human beings have been moving more of their activities indoors. Social and technological changes in the past three decades have accelerated that change in both cities and rural areas. The many barriers to connecting with nature include poor design in neighborhoods, homes, schools, workplaces; dangers from the (media-amplified) fear of strangers to concerns like traffic and toxins; and fear of lawyers. In a litigious society, families, schools, communities play it safe, creating “risk-free” environments that actually create greater risks later. Also, the “criminalization” of natural play through social attitudes, community covenants and regulations, and good intentions. Much of society—including much of the education establishment—no longer sees independent, imaginative play, especially in natural settings, as “enrichment.”

Many schools have limited outdoor recess time in favor of increased academic focus. Does academic performance increase under these more restricted schedules? If so, is the loss of outdoor unstructured playtime worth the gain?

As childhood has become increasingly regulated by adults, the decline in children’s free play parallels the greater human disconnection with nature. Make-believe play in the natural world not only stimulates the senses, but also builds good sense. The evidence strongly suggests that the natural world increases physical competency linked to mental acuity, increases ability to see patterns, offers new disciplines to perceive and apply knowledge, and expands the palate of possibilities. Several studies show that children who play in natural settings are more cooperative and more likely to create their own games than those who play on flat turf or asphalt playgrounds. All of this underscores why the trend toward cut-

In the current political climate, what hopeful message can you offer kids and families who want to continue their efforts to learn more about nature, and appreciate and protect it?

For years, our culture has struggled with two addictions: oil and despair. We can’t kick one of those habits without kicking the other. For many people, thinking about the future conjures up grim images from movies like Blade Runner or Mad Max or Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, a novel about a post-apocalyptic dystopia stripped of nature. We seem drawn to that flame, but there’s more hope in the air, if you look for it.

In a blog essay I posted, called “Seven Reasons for a New Nature Movement,” I paraphrased Martin Luther King Jr., who taught us that any movement—any culture—will fail if it cannot paint a picture of a world people want to go to. One way to begin painting that hopeful future is to reset environmentalism and sustainability to evolve into a larger movement that can touch every part of society. The future will belong to the nature-smart, the individuals, families, business, and political leaders who develop a deeper understanding of the transformative power of the natural world, and who balance the virtual with the real. That’s a future worth having, but first, we have to imagine it.

Although the barriers between people and nature remain challenging, we’re seeing some progress among state legislatures, schools and businesses, civic organizations, and government agencies. Children’s museums could play an even larger role in dissolving barriers, acting as conveners, sources of bioregional information, and in the direct creation of family nature clubs (multiple families that agree to show up for a hike on Saturday). Hundreds of clubs like this now exist, and many contain hundreds of families. For example, a family nature club created by parents in San Diego just a few years ago now has a membership of over 1,800 families. (A free toolkit for creating your own family nature club is available at the Children & Nature Network website.)

Outside the U.S., what are other countries doing to combat “nature deficit disorder” and
**better connect families with nature?**

The movement is growing internationally. The Children & Nature Network’s recent international conference in Vancouver drew nearly 900 delegates from twenty-two countries. (I’m hoping to see even more representation from children’s museums around the world at the 2018 conference in San Francisco.) Key to the growth of the movement is considering it as a human rights issue. In September 2012, the World Congress of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) cited “adverse consequences for both healthy child development (‘nature deficit disorder’) as well as responsible stewardship for nature and the environment in the future,” and then passed the resolution “The Child’s Right to Connect with Nature and to a Healthy Environment.” Our connection to nature is, indeed, a human right.

And while acknowledgement of this is progress, many barriers between children and nature still exist, and some are growing.

**What are some first steps in increasing opportunities for kids to connect with nature?**

Every region is different, but a first step might be to convene a broad cross-section of community leaders—politicians, policymakers, partners, volunteers, educators, architects, landscape architects, urban designers, physicians, and other professionals—to plan the best approaches to “re-nature” a city or community. Such a reunion between humans and nature has the power to create or enhance human and economic potential.

These professionals can write a health prescription for a city that will evolve into a practical rebuilding plan: how to rebuild local food webs, how to establish an urban forest to help clean the air and provide shade, or how to encourage urban wildlife. They can talk about how to naturalize bicycle and pedestrian paths, how to offer cleaner public transport, how to develop policies to encourage the design of green roofs, green walls, and green schoolyards. Cities can become engines of biodiversity.

As the designer William McDonough suggested, communities should be created that not only reduce our carbon footprints, but also create wetlands and other wildlife habitats, even in densely populated cities. Such a movement might create a regional scorecard to include the economic benefits of greening the city, with consideration to the ways a green city can reshape healthcare, tourism, and law enforcement in positive ways.

Ecopsychologists, or wilderness therapy professionals, are going mainstream. Some pediatricians are now prescribing or recommending “green exercise” in parks and other natural settings to their young patients and their families. Hospitals, mental health centers, and nursing homes are creating healing gardens. The Portland, OR, parks department partners with physicians who send families to local parks, where park rangers serve as health paraprofessionals. In the U.K., a growing “green care” movement encourages therapeutic horticulture, ecotherapy, and green care farming.

**In the eleven-plus years of your work on nature education, what are some unexpected outcomes or results?**

I’ve learned to my surprise that this is an intrinsically hopeful issue. The concern about connecting children to nature transcends political and religious barriers, and brings people together. It not only helps people look at education, healthcare, and urban design and architecture differently, but it may also help conservationists take the next step in the evolution of environmentalism.

If we checked back with you ten years from now and asked for a progress report on connecting kids and nature, what would you hope you’d be telling us?

That kids’ lives are as immersed in nature every day as they are in technology. That cities have evolved to incorporate nature into every building and on every block—which serves to restore residents psychologically, physically, even spiritually.

In “Imagine a Newer World,” an essay adapted from The Nature Principle, I paint a modest portrait of what I hope that that world will be like.

[www.childrenandnature.org/2017/05/03/imagine-a-newer-world/](http://www.childrenandnature.org/2017/05/03/imagine-a-newer-world/)

**What role do you see children’s museums playing in better connecting their community’s children with nature?**

The seeds of the future are planted in our homes and neighborhoods, but also in a community’s businesses and institutions. Schools, museums, zoos, service organizations, churches, and more are the connectors of community. I am delighted to hear that more than fifty children’s museums around the U.S. are in the process of developing outdoor exhibits and play areas, some of which are written about in this issue.

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