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What makes a backpacker a backpacker? It's not the garage full of gear or piles of guidebooks—it's the experiences, from thru-hiking a long trail to pushing your personal envelope to inspiring a child's love of wilderness. Here are 10 to add to your tick-list now—and the key skills you need to nail them. By Michael Lanza



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Fact: Kids need to get outdoors. Myth: That's hard to do. From hiking-club organizers to after-school mentors, meet 10 heroes who are leading the way—and learn how you can do the same. By Jason Stevenson



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EYE IN THE SKY

104 Into the Blue Name this vibrant hot spring and the park it's in, and you could win a Casio Gz'One PAW2000-ICR watch.

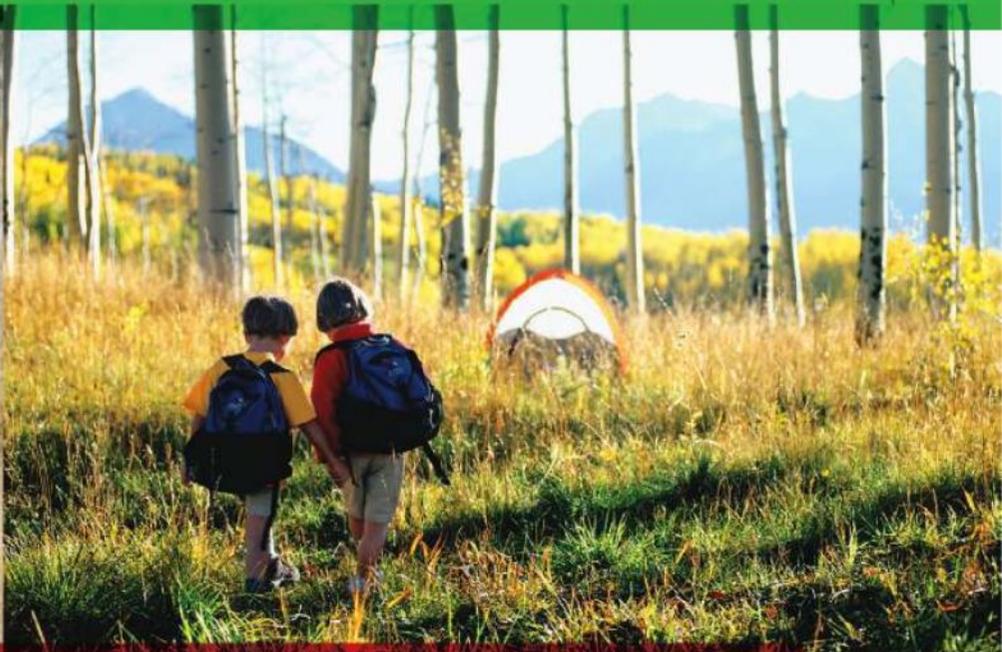
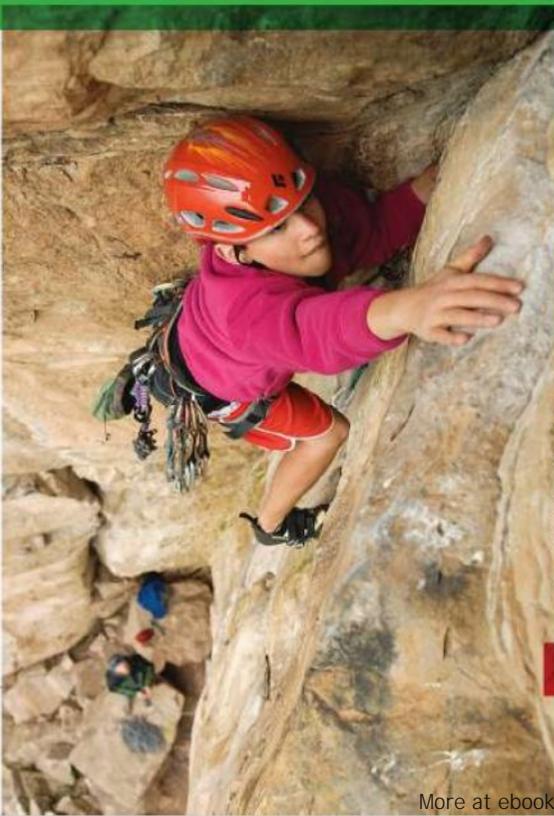
88 The Trail to Neverland

High up in New Hampshire's White Mountains, where snow can fall in July and the paths start steep and get steeper, a magical transformation occurs each summer. A crew of young adults shows up to operate America's oldest network of alpine huts, where they provide refuge for hikers, rescue the lost and weary, and savor a moment in life when time stands still. By Bill Donahue



Last Child on the Couch

How 10 grassroots innovators are helping kids get active outdoors



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RICHARD DURMAN/AURORA; KENNAN HARVEY

A SPECIAL REPORT IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE OUTDOOR FOUNDATION

by Jason Stevenson

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OUR KIDS ARE IN TROUBLE.

MAYBE NOT YOUR KIDS, BUT THEIR FRIENDS, OR PERHAPS A TEENAGER DOWN THE STREET. TWO WHOLE GENERATIONS—STARTING WITH PEOPLE ENTERING THEIR THIRTIES NOW—HAVE GROWN UP WITH WHAT AUTHORS LIKE RICHARD LOUV LABEL “NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER.” DESPITE BEING AMERICA’S MOST ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE SEGMENT, MANY OF THESE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE FEW REAL CONNECTIONS TO THE OUTDOORS. THEY ARE TAUGHT TO HUG A TREE, BUT NOT HOW TO CLIMB ONE.

Fortunately, the cure isn't a mystery. Our kids need to move. Hike, bike, paddle, skate, walk, run, whatever—just move. And they need to do it outdoors, both for the exercise and the exposure to sunshine and fresh air. Introduce kids to nature at a young age, studies show, and you give them a foundation for lifelong health, fitness, and self-confidence.

At a national level, the Outdoor Foundation, the Children & Nature Network, and First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" initiative are training leaders and developing tool kits that help parents and educators make a difference. But even more exciting is what's happening at the grassroots level. Across the country, local hiking clubs, guides, and teachers are inventing new programs to reintroduce the outdoors to one child, one school, and one neighborhood at a time.

How can a BACKPACKER reader help kids get off the Wii and into the woods? We talked to 10 local heroes to highlight creative—and successful—initiatives.

» Start a Local Hiking Group

Ten months after the birth of her first child, Wendy Sparks was going nuts. "I needed to get outside," the Idyllwild, California, mom recalls, "so I convinced some friends to go hiking." They quickly noticed their kids

were the only ones on the trail. Figuring that fellow moms didn't know where to go, Sparks organized more hikes and recruited participants through social-networking websites, posters, and flyers. Two years later, Inland Empire Kids Outdoors (iekidsoutdoors.org) organizes weekly hikes and events for more than 600 families. "Southern California is populated by new residents living in recently built suburbs who don't know where to go," says Sparks. Her club not only describes local trails, but members hike in the safety of a group—a big plus for parents with young kids. If you can't find an existing club, ask friends and neighbors to join you on hikes, says Sparks. Download the Children & Nature Network's starter tool kit (childrenandnature.org/downloads/NCFE_toolkit.pdf) and begin with short local jaunts. Post notices in the library or newspapers, and communicate using email lists and sites like Facebook and meetup.com.

» Learn a New Sport Together

Research shows that most kids get introduced to the outdoors through their parents. But mom and dad can become students, too. Matt Poppleton watches it happen with some frequency at the REI store in Bloomington, Minnesota, where he directs events and outreach. Like many outdoor stores and hiking clubs, REI offers dozens of free clinics on climbing, geocaching, and boating. He loves it when parents and kids show up for the classes together. "Families are more at ease when everyone's a beginner," Poppleton says. "And sometimes the kids are quicker on the climbing wall or rolling kayaks, and end up teaching their parents." Not only can adults learn new skills, but families develop new activities to enjoy together. Case in point: Poppleton



PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JUSTIN BAILIE; PHIL SCHERMEISTER/CORBIS; JUSTIN BAILIE (2)

recently saw three young girls tow their father into the store to get certificates recognizing their completion of REI's Family Adventure Program (rei.com/passport)—a nationwide initiative to promote local hiking. “The girls were dressed in tutus and tiaras and probably on their way to a dance recital,” he recalls, “but they were super excited to finish the hikes—and their dad looked proud, too.”

» **Inspire a Future Spielberg**

Next time your child begs to bring a digital thingamajig hiking—let him. “Gadgets aren't necessarily the enemy,” argues Kat Diamond, co-founder of Nature Strollers, a hiking club based in Orange County, New York. “By encouraging kids to take photos or record a movie during a hike,” she says, “you'll help them to share the experience with their friends and have more fun.” According to a 2008 Outdoor Foundation survey, teens cited too little time and too much schoolwork—not their addictions to cell phones and handheld video games—as the factors keeping them inside. So instead of unplugging your kids, equip them with cameras and assign them the task of recording your adventures. Diamond saw this strategy work last spring when a group of kids discovered several toads mating loudly in a pond. “We all took photos and shot videos,” she says, “and several kids put together a hilarious movie on their home computers—that they excitedly shared with friends.”

» **Sign Them Up for a Wild Summer**

Your kids scoff at standard-issue summer camp? Too boring, they say? Pack 'em off to Survivor Camp. Instead of face-painting and dodgeball, your child will learn how to start no-match fires, follow animal tracks, and build wilderness shelters. “Parents kept asking us for a more intense summer experience,” says Stacey Heffernan, who organizes the weeklong wilderness camp for middle schoolers at Ohio's Cuyahoga Valley National Park. “So our rangers created it.” Studies show that realistic, project-based instruction makes a lasting impression on kids. That's why the CVNP's instructors teach new wilderness skills throughout the week, leading to a “sleep under the stars” overnight challenge. To find a summer camp that will challenge your child, go to naturerocks.org.

» **Cut Back on Organized Sports**

Growing up in Norway, Kari Svenneby went outside every day. “We didn't play soccer or baseball,” she recalls. “Instead, we made tree forts, dammed rivers to make ponds, and picked berries.” Norwegians call this approach to child-raising *friluftsliv* (pronounced: FrEE-looft-sleeve), which literally means “free air living.” If that concept sounds foreign, it's because our kids are increasingly trading outdoor activity for organized sports—from 1981 to 1997, the number of hours consumed by team sports leapt by a whopping 27 percent. On the surface, that doesn't seem so bad, but studies show that playing sports is actually less vigorous than self-directed play. As an alternative to softball and soccer—and their weekend-gobbling schedules—Svenneby incorporated *friluftsliv* into her Active Kids Club (activekidsclub.com), a year-round playgroup that explores Toronto's urban parks and recently expanded to six neighborhoods. “In Norway, playing outside is part of our cultural heritage,” Svenneby notes. “But here, you need to fight for it.”

» **Enlist Teachers and Principals**

Education bureaucrats will never write an exam question on the proper way to skip a stone. So American schoolchildren—who on average already spend less than 30 minutes a week outside—will continue to fidget at their desks. But not the kids at the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center, a preschool in Mystic, Connecticut. They've gone outside every day except for one since the school opened two years ago. “If you get outdoors—even for 15 minutes a day—you are instilling nature as a regular part of a child's life,” says director Davnet Conway Schaffer. Research also demonstrates that kids who play outside develop longer attention spans, better coordination, and more creative problem-solving skills. Help teach your educators and principals that outdoor learning is real learning, and give them resources for standards-based outdoor education. Schaffer recommends teaching kits from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (vinsweb.org), which provides hands-on environmental curricula from preschool to high-school levels. →



» Reach Older Kids

Mud puddles will entertain a toddler for hours. But take a teen on a family hike, and they'll be BOOMS (text message lingo for "bored out of my skull"). Keeping children tuned in is what Chip Donahue does as a teacher and as co-founder of Kids in the Valley (kidsadventuring.org), a hiking club in Roanoke, Virginia. "You can't motivate teens with threats or bribes," Donahue explains. "Instead, you need to discover what they really want—and channel it into the activity." During a recent hike, he saw a father yank away a video game from his son, who quickly became surly. "I gave the boy an assignment to organize the other kids to check out a creek and report back to me," says Donahue. Within a few minutes, he'd forgotten his anger and his video game. "Adults forget that kids have very little control over their own lives," says Donahue. "The outdoors is one space where they can be the bosses." Let older kids plan hikes, set goals, and, most importantly, bring along friends.

» Save Outdoor Education

In May 2009, the school board in Olympia, Washington, voted to cut the three-day trip to Cispus Learning Center, an outdoor learning camp that Ryan Hall's fifth-grade daughter, Jordan, was set to attend. Not so fast. By December, Hall and a team of dedicated parents had raised \$60,000—mostly from movie nights, raffles, and selling Christmas wreaths—to retain the treasured program. Olympia's dilemma isn't unique. Cash-strapped boards from Toledo to Philadelphia are cutting camps. The solution, according to Hall, is to mobilize the support a threatened football team would get. That model has worked in Flagstaff, Arizona, where the school district's Camp Colton turned to a local nonprofit to help fund their weeklong wilderness camps for sixth graders. Another strategy is keeping tabs on your local school board. "If there had been 10 people at the May board meeting saying, 'We should save Cispus,' it wouldn't have been cut," Hall says.

» Become a Grassroots Mentor

Juan Martinez is suitably awed by Yosemite and the summits of Fourteeners he's climbed, but the Los Angeles resident says it's the nature in a kid's own backyard that makes the biggest difference. And he should know, since it was a detention assignment—planting a spice garden—at his South Central high school that turned him into a backpacker. "After I grew those seeds and made salsa for my mother," he says, "I wanted more—more nature, more discovery." With help from his school's Eco Club and several mentors, Martinez hiked in the Tetons and rafted the Grand Canyon. Now, at 26, he's back home grooming young leaders for the Children & Nature Network. "The natural world shouldn't be extreme or far away," he explains, especially for lower-income urban kids who lag behind their more affluent peers in outdoor participation rates. Through the Network, he inspires new leaders and supports a wide range of hyper-local gateway activities that aim to lower the barriers of cost and proximity. You can, too: naturalleaders.org.

» Find Them a Trail Job Next Summer

When lining up teen jobs, think beyond house-painting and lifeguarding. Those will get youth outside, but not like a trail crew or park internship will. The National Park Service hires 10,000 seasonal employees from wranglers to fire tower observers. Check specific park websites (nps.gov/findapark) for the latest and best opportunities. Or try the Student Conservation Association (thesca.org), which deploys teenage crews to 250 NPS properties every year. Sporting distinctive yellow hardhats, SCA crews cut down trees, build lean-tos, prevent trail erosion—and enhance their resumes for outdoor-focused careers, says Kevin Hamilton, a vice president at SCA. Closer to home, teens can work as counselors-in-training at outdoor camps or challenge courses—and see another kind of green. In BACKPACKER's Boulder hometown, the Open Space and Mountain Parks department hires high schoolers as junior rangers—at a starting wage of more than \$7 an hour. 🚫



Outdoor-Palooza

A new green gathering brings today's best young minds to Central Park.

"Our generation can't depend on adults or elite athletes to save us," says Outdoor Nation ambassador Nitish Nag, a 21-year-old UC-Berkeley senior. That's why Nag and 500 other young leaders will descend on Central Park this June 19-20 for the inaugural Outdoor Youth Summit. They'll participate in conversations about conservation and proven ways to inspire their peers to become adventure advocates. There will also be a job and internship fair, and serious playtime as part of BACKPACKER's Adventures NYC: Delegates will disperse across the park for kayaking, fly-fishing, climbing, and yoga. Sponsors, which include the Outdoor Foundation, Conservation Fund, The North Face, REI, BACKPACKER, and the New York City Parks Department, see an opportunity to foster real progress at a grassroots level—and help Nag light a fire. "We all know how effective peer pressure can be," says Outdoor Foundation executive director Chris Fanning. "The Summit is a first step in leveraging the power of teenage persuasion to get more kids onto America's trails." More info: outdoornation.org