

NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER

A recent study from Australia found that of the 1975 children surveyed, 37% of children spent less than half an hour a day playing outdoors after school, and 43% spent more than 2 hours a day on screen time (*i.e.* watching TV, videos or playing computer games).

The story is similar from most urban places round the world. In the US, between 1997 to 2003, studies have documented a 50% decline in time that 9-12 year olds are spending outdoors. Issues of safety, both working parents, lack of parks and natural surroundings in our bleak urban landscape and the lure of the TV and computer are important reasons why children are spending more time indoors. Richard Louv, in his book “Last child in the Woods,” has coined a new term “nature deficit disorder” which includes a range of behavioral problems. He argues that sensationalist media coverage and paranoid parents have literally “scared children straight out of the woods and fields,” while promoting a litigious culture of fear that favors “safe” regimented sports over imaginative play.

In the US they have now launched a public service mass advertisement campaign “Leave no child indoors”. The campaign is aimed at tweens (8-12 year olds) to foster a life long interest and love in nature. Besides improving their physical and psychological health, it will make them more environmentally conscious (*Scientific American*, 4 August 2009).

SWINE FLU VACCINE

Several companies around the world have started testing their swine flu vaccines. Sanofi Aventis and Panacea Biotech in Europe and CSL from Australia have started human trials. The trials are testing both safety and dose requirement. WHO chief Marie-Paule Kieny feels that vaccine should be ready by September. India is not far behind with 3 companies - Serum Institute of India (Pune), Bharat Biotech (Hyderabad) and Panacea Biotech (Delhi), working on developing the vaccine. Serum Institute is developing an egg based vaccine while the other two companies are developing cell-line vaccines. Fast track approval of the vaccine will be done and human trials should begin around November.

CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that swine flu vaccine should first go to: pregnant women, household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age, healthcare and emergency medical services personnel, all children and young adults from 6 months through 24 years of age, and persons aged 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza. The fears that haunt a mass immunization program like this include side effects of the vaccine like Guillian Barre syndrome that resulted in stopping of the 1976 flu vaccination campaign (*The Times of India*, 9 August 2009).

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