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The Outsiders: A New ‘In’ Group

Written by Christine Fanning, executive director of The Outdoor Foundation

Not long ago, it was serious punishment for a teenager to be ‘grounded’ – life abruptly and completely confined to the indoors. Few things seemed worse than having one’s freedom and ability to play outside taken away. Today, in the age of extreme video games, online social networks and infinite television options, many young people actually prefer to stay inside – moving little more than their fingers and thumbs.

Some see this trend as just a new generation of teens being teens. Except the consequences of being an inactive ‘insider’ can be serious: obesity, depression, diabetes and ADHD are all on the rise among youth. In fact, the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 20 percent of youth will be obese by 2010; more than three million American children today have significant depression symptoms and the number of children diagnosed with ADHD has risen more than 30% since 1997. Perhaps most alarming of all, are the new predictions that say today’s young people will have a shorter life-expectancy than their parents.

Fortunately, there is an emerging ‘in’ crowd among today’s youth: the outsiders. These kids don’t live online in a virtual world; they are outdoors experiencing natural adventures like whitewater kayaking, mountain biking and rock climbing as well as more relaxed activities like hiking, camping and wildlife watching. And while there is a growing body of research that shows the positive impact outdoor play has on the physical, emotional and mental health of youth – there are not enough accessible natural places or nature-based programs to go around.

Not surprisingly, in these difficult economic times, financial support for park and green-space protection as well as outdoor recreation programs can be hard to find. Here in Littleton and across the country, The Outdoor Foundation is working with leading public and private organizations to raise awareness and funding for initiatives that get youth active, outside and healthy. With support from Colorado-based organizations such as Osprey, GoLite, Sierra Designs, Backpacker Magazine and the Outdoor Industry Association, the Foundation provided seed money to Foothills Park & Recreation District for its Teens Outside program, which was recognized this week by the National Forum on Children and Nature as one of our country’s best initiatives connecting kids with the outdoors.

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The Teens Outside Program hosted by the Foothills Park & Recreation District in Littleton, Colorado has offered youth a chance to go whitewater rafting, rock climbing, and learn wilderness survival skills. Through their collaboration with the Exempla West Pines Training Center, the organization aspires to build a nationally recognized environmental education program founded on experiential initiatives that expose participants to numerous leadership, character development, and teambuilding concepts while being physically active in the most ideal learning environment - nature.

In addition to Teens Outside, there are a growing number of local programs and organizations that are addressing the nature deficit in our youth – many focusing on legislation, nature centers, nature-based preschools and community open space. Nationally, The Outdoor Foundation and its partners are working together to transform this grassroots effort into a mainstream movement. But much more needs to be done. After all, much more than play is at stake.

In December 2008, Foothills' Teens Outside Program will be offering opportunities in a Learn to Ski program and a High Ropes Course. For more information about the Teens Outside Program at Foothills Park & Recreation District, call Lara Holzman at 303.409.2301 or visit www.ifoohills.org.

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Foothills Park & Recreation District, founded in 1959, serves a community of 90,000 residents in a 28 square mile area of unincorporated Jefferson County generally bounded by Hampden Avenue south to C-470 from Sheridan Boulevard west to the Dakota Hogback. The District operates the Ridge Recreation Center, Edge Ice Arena, Lilley Gulch Recreation Center, Peak Community and Wellness Center, four outdoor swimming pools, Indoor Sports Arena, Foothills Golf Course complex, Meadows Golf Course, and 70 park sites totaling more than 2,400 acres and including four regional parks, 42 neighborhood and community parks and 24 greenbelts. In addition Foothills manages six regional trail corridors for public use, which, combined with park trails, total more than 31 miles. For more information visit www.ifoohills.org, or call 303.409.2100.