

Snowshoeing Education 203: Snowshoeing is a Family Affair

By Jim Joque

The “family that plays together stays together” is a good adage for why snowshoeing as a family can be an enriching activity to foster healthy values and enrich relationships. In 2005, author Richard Louv made an impact on a movement to get children connected with nature. In his book *“Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder,”* Louv identifies the current value of nature as an abstraction rather than a reality for children who are increasingly becoming disconnected with the natural world around them. Louv implied that this situation can and should be reversed by having children return to experiencing and appreciating nature.

He goes a step further by recommending parents explore nature with their children when he wrote, “It’s a good thing to learn more about nature in order to share this knowledge with children; it’s even better if the adult and child learn about nature together. And it’s a lot more fun.”

This past November 2010, Wisconsin Congressman Ron Kind introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, a new bill that would support government plans to connect children with nature. The *Moving Outdoors in Nature Act* (or the bill H.R. 6426) was created to help get America’s children active and healthy by supporting outdoor recreation programming, initiatives and learning.

And Congressman Kind’s bill was in line with President Obama’s *America’s Great Outdoors* (AGO) initiative to reconnect children and families to recreation, conservation and the outdoors. In April, 2010, Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum stating that the AGO will “promote and support innovative community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and to reconnect Americans to the outdoors.”

On another note, recent research showed that there was an overall downward slide in outdoor recreation participation of six to 12 year-olds over the past four years; from 78 percent participating in outdoor recreation of some form in 2006, dropping to 62 percent in 2009. And, participation rates for 13 to 17 year-olds dropped from 69 percent in 2006 to 60 percent in 2009. These results are from the Outdoor Foundation’s *“Outdoor Recreation Participation Report”* of 2010, where they stated that “although participation in outdoor activities is higher among youth than any other age group, decreases among youth may mean shrinking numbers of outdoor enthusiasts for future generations.”

Considering these concerning statistics, it is apparent that the above political interests as well as the pleading words of Dr. Louv support the importance of getting kids outside. It is equally important to have parents take their kids outside to help foster outdoor values and interests. In the same participation report, kids ages six to 12 were asked, “What motivates your decision not to participate in outdoor activities?” One of the top responses was, “My parents don’t take me to go on outdoor activities.”

With all this in mind, my concern as a snowshoe enthusiast and educator is to get kids and their families outdoors in winter. On the upshot from the 2010 participation report is the good news that, “participation in outdoor recreation among youth increased in some outdoor activities in 2009, including snowshoeing





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(up 26 percent).” What better opportunity to get kids and their parents outside during winter than to put them on snowshoes.

For the purpose of defining “family” in this article, it is important to mention that a family by definition should not only include the traditional family made up a mother and father with biological off-springs. A family should also include blended families, families with adopted or foster children, step-children and step-parents, single parents, grandparents, and partner-parents (both different and same gender). All are families and all can get outside together to play in the snow.

And should a family member have a disabling condition that prevents them from walking on snowshoes, they too can be included by getting outside in winter, perhaps using some form of adaptive device such as a sit-ski or a pulk-sled.

An Example of a Midwest Family Snowshoeing Weekend

Some outstanding national programs are working hard at that very task of getting kids outside in winter, with a focus on snowshoeing as well as other winter sports. “*Winter Kids*” is a Maine based non-profit organization committed to helping kids develop healthy lifestyles by becoming outdoor winter enthusiasts (www.winterkids.org).

“*SnowSchool*” is a nationwide winter ecology education program and a division of Winter Wildlands Alliance. SnowSchool also has a focus of motivating kids to get outdoors in the winter (www.snowschoo.org).



And, “*Winter Feels Good*,” is yet another dedicated program and has education information for kids, parents and educators online (www.winterfeelsgood.com).

One example of a family snowshoeing program exists in the Midwest at a place in north-central Wisconsin called “*Treehaven*.” Treehaven is a 1,400-acre forest and includes an education and conference center with classrooms, computer lab, library, cafeteria, dormitories and amphitheater. The facility and property are used for teaching natural resources to college students. It also serves as an education facility for the community. Located about 12 miles east of the small town of Tomahawk, Treehaven is owned and operated by my employer, the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point (<http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/treehaven>). It is a winter wonderland this time of year

John Heusinkveld is Treehaven’s assistant director. He is involved in developing educational programs at the facility for youth and adults, as well as teaching environmental education and natural resource courses. In 2003, John and I created a family snowshoeing weekend program that we co-facilitate annually for children ages six to 12 and their parents, titled “*Snowshoe Weekend for Kids and Parents*.”

The weekend program begins on a Saturday morning with “*indoor snowshoe school*.” Following a few ice-breaker activities and name games, kids and parents are introduced to a variety of wood-frame traditional, aluminum-frame and plastic snowshoes. Families also learn about clothing and layering as well as having a lesson on outdoor winter safety.

Soon after indoor school, everyone is fitted with snowshoes and sent outdoors for warm-up games of *Simon-says*, *follow-the-leader* and *tree-tag*. This form of active immersion on snowshoes provides good trial-and-error training for both kids and adults.



After a healthy lunch, John and I lead families to the base of a steep hill to learn stretching exercises followed by snowshoe technique training; including turning around, breaking trail, getting up, and ascending, traversing and descending hills. We hear a lot of “yahoos” and “yeehaas” coming from both the children and parents as they glissaded downhill after learning how to get up there to begin with.

With skills in place, everyone is ready to hit the trails. There are roughly 20 miles of trails on Treehaven property. Our group hikes about three miles. Our first stop along the way is the summit of a large hill and the highest point on the property. At this point, adventure-seeking snowshoers delight in taking a downhill plunge into deep snow...and back up again. This activity is indeed an invigorating challenge and a chance to put their newly learned skills to practice.

At another stop along the trail, we have a snack and families hear tales about the Ojibwa influence on snowshoeing. Stories are also shared about voyageurs and trappers who relied on snowshoes for travel during the 18th and 19th centuries as well as snowshoe use for recreation at the turn of the 20th century. By the time our group returns to the facility, everyone is pooped and ready for dinner.

The day however, is not over yet. We convene at 7 p.m. for the highlight of the weekend...a night-hike and wolf howl. Kids love this event. It is magical and reaffirms Louv’s concept of the value in returning kids to nature. On more than one occasion we are fortunate to have a perfect night with stars so bright, it feels like (as one child said), “we can almost reach out and touch them.”

John Heusinkveld is an excellent howler. On one given night out on a frozen pond, we all stood in close proximity while John walked off, disappearing into the darkness. From a nearby island, he climbed onto a snow bank, and then he made a mysterious sound that began as a low moan and increased to a loud wolf-like howling crescendo. Chills ran up and down all our spines....and not from the cold.



It became dead silent, but there was no response to his howl. He tried again. After several calls, the group howled in unison. All partook in the ritual of trying to coax a returning wolf call. On this particular night, there was no response. John has succeeded on rare occasions to elicit responses from wolf packs in the area, definitely an exciting opportunity for anyone to experience.

We then take our families to a gazebo that overlooks the pond for a campfire, s'mores, a campfire game and a reading of a fun story by Nancy Smiler Levinson titled, "Snowshoe Thompson." Soon, eyelids begin to droop...sooner for the six-year olds than for the 12 year-olds. And in some cases, it comes sooner for a tired parent. It is then a short hike back to the facility for bedtime.

Early to rise on Sunday morning is required in order to make breakfast by 8 a.m., and then we all head out onto a wide open field for competitive games on snowshoes...definitely the hit of the day. Laughter, cheering and excitement fills the air with a sled race, a plastic-egg relay race, snowshoeing through an obstacle course blindfolded, and a competitive game of "moon ball" with beach-balls flying high in the air. But the culminating event is playing kickball on snowshoes, using a big beach ball and hula-hoops for bases.

After lunch we play a video on Leave No Trace for the parents, while kids create some imaginative posters on the subject. The day then ends with an hour nature hike on a wooded single-track trail that eventually runs along a scenic creek. On one occasion John told fun stories about otters when we came across their slide marks on the creek. On another hike, we spotted a porcupine high in a tree. Families learned about the animal while viewing it in its natural habitat that day.

Two years ago, I was pleased to have my daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters participated in the *Snowshoe Weekend for Kids and Parents*. At that time, both granddaughters fit in the six to 12 age category. They delighted in the program and I delighted in sharing this outdoor experience with my

family. My daughter's family hikes, bikes, camps, fish, canoe, and yes...snowshoe. They believe in spending lots of time outdoors together.

Tips for Healthy Family Snowshoeing

Here are five suggestions for families to enjoy snowshoeing together. Parents...take your kids snowshoeing this season and strengthen your family relationships.

1. If your budget allows, go shopping and outfit your family with snowshoes; renting snowshoes is a good option as well.
2. Commit one day or a weekend each month during the winter and take the entire family snowshoeing.
3. On one of your outings, plan to play games on snowshoes – such as those you played as a child, like hide-and-seek, follow-the-leader or kickball.
4. Be adventurous and plan one of your outings as a night hike near home or at a local park, and do a moonlight hike on a full moon and clear sky night. Full moons this winter fall on Jan. 19, Feb. 18, and March 19.
5. Look for a family snowshoeing activity in your area such as a nature center hike, a candlelight snowshoeing event, a school sponsored snowshoeing program, or a community snowshoe race.

On a larger scale for example, consider having your family participate in regional or national snowshoe racing championship events, or attend as spectators. The United States Snowshoe Association's 11th Annual 2011 Dion Snowshoes U.S. National Snowshoe Championships will be held in my home state at Cable, Wisconsin on March 11-13 (for regional and national event information, go to www.snowshoeracing.com).

Richard Louv wrote, "How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children, will shape the configuration and condition of our cities, homes...our daily lives." We can begin by taking our children outdoors to snowshoe.





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