Character In the Wilderness

Once we were wild people. Once we lived off the wilderness. Once we knew how to gather, scavenge and survive. But now, what have we become? A modern, lazy society, with blue screens through every window and cars instead of legs. Are we really quite that scared of discomfort, that we deny our descendants the very encounters needed to develop character? The children and teens of this generation are not spending enough time outside, we only reside in comfort – with everything done for us, and we aren’t as adventurous and daring as our ancestors.

Children, especially tweens and teenagers, have spent excessive amounts of time on technology. According to the Australian Government’s Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) a 12–13-year-old child’s screen time averages three hours per weekday, and as they grow into tweens that number doubles to over eight hours per day, which means up to 30% of a child’s waking time is spent in front of a screen. Being in the wilderness for even leisure, such as camp, instead of fixedly staring at an iPad, can not only build character but strengthen kids’ focus levels and let them respect and appreciate nature.

A teenagers’ lungs sting as he reaches the top of a mountain, tears of exhaustion and pride welling in his eyes. On the other side of the world, a small girl from Scouts sits among the towering pines, breathing in a scent that seemed almost… rare. They both lived in a home with easy-to-do packaging, remote controls for anything and everything just within reach. This would most definitely be true for almost everyone, as the modern world we live in is built on a foundation that involves easy access to whatever needed (or wanted). Stepping out of our comfort zone is a crucial part of our ancestors’ life. If they hadn’t learnt to be brave and courageous, they most likely would’ve been eaten by tigers. Comfort is something we take for granted and are accustomed to – stepping out of it and breaking away from ‘modern’ society is a crucial part of building who you really are.

Critics may argue that the wilderness may not be safe. However, building character in the wild does not necessarily mean a three-month trip into a dense forest with only water and some rations. Rather, a scout camp or just a one-hour outback exploration session is all it takes for children and teens to appreciate nature and forge a strong, resilient character. Activities that create character include tree climbing, setting up tents, getting water from a well or simply discovering a passion in the wild – like bird watching and leaf paintings. Additionally, camp areas are always approved by officials, and any threats or wild animals have either been removed or transported away from the safe areas.

To conclude, building character in the wilderness not only forges a deeper understanding and appreciation of nature, but protects against technology addiction and lets tweens enjoy a fresh air that they barely interact with, frees us from the cruel holds of ‘modern’ society and clarifies just how important and different this change would be. When we say that we have no time for playing – we are denying our very own descendants a resilience and understanding that our ancestors held for millennia.