

Daily dose of ecotherapy eases stress in kids

By Katie Arnold, *Outside*

Every few months my daughter's public elementary school, like schools all around the country, practices emergency lockdown measures. "If there's a bear outside, we go into our closet and turn off the lights," my daughter, who's 7, explained to me after the most recent drill. "We lie on the floor and put backpacks on our heads, all squished together. We're not allowed to talk because bears are much stronger than people and can crash through the windows and get us. We have to stay in the closet for an hour until it's safe."

As a second-grader, my daughter and her classmates are still too young to know exactly what—or who—they're defending against. Bears, of course, aren't nearly as grave a danger facing school children as gun violence, as this fall's deadly school shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon reminded us. The tragedy was the 295th mass shooting in the U.S. this year, on the 274th day of the year.

Even when school violence happens across the country to children and people we don't know, the trauma affects us all, to varying degrees.

What we can do is help them cope and try to ensure that the recent spate of violence—and attacks that may occur in the future—don't leave them with lasting emotional trauma. Among the common-sense strategies the Department of Interior recommends in the aftermath of a national tragedy: talking to your children about their fears, limiting their exposure to television and online news coverage, creating a safe environment at home, and resuming normal physical activities.

There's another proven way to ease concerns and treat trauma:

ecotherapy. That's the term coined in the mid-1990s for using nature to promote psychological healing. "Nature therapies are being used very successfully to ease both emotional and physical trauma, and stress is one more form of this," says Linda Buzzell, co-editor of the book "Ecotherapy: and a psychotherapist at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara.

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