

ADHD IS FUELFOR ADVENTURE

Some of the best medicine for kids with attention-deficit disorders may be extreme sports and outdoor learning. That's good news, because not only do they need exploration, but exploration desperately needs them.

By Florence Williams

By second grade, it was clear that while Zack Smith could sit in a chair, he had no intention of staying in it. He was disruptive in class, spoke in a loud voice, and had a hard time taking turns with others. His parents fed him a series of medications for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, many of which didn't work. Zack, who attended school in West Hartford, Connecticut, was placed in special classrooms where he showed a propensity for

lashing out. Twice suspended, he was miserable. He didn't seem to care about anything at school. When his parents realized that his path would likely lead to worse trouble, they pulled the ripcord on eighth grade.

Where Zack eventually landed is clinging spread-eagle to an east-facing slab of quartzite in the West Virginia panhandle. His chin-length, strawberry blond hair curls out beneath a Minion-yellow helmet. A harness cinches his T-shirt—the sleeves of which have been ripped off—obscuring the CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE lettering.

"I have a wedgie!" he bellows out from 20 feet up.

Belaying him is another 14-year-old—pale, earnest Daniel. Earlier in the day, Daniel asked, "Do I have to belay? I'm only 95 pounds." Both kids still look a little apprehensive, but there's no question that they are paying full attention to the wall of rock and

to the rope that unites them. Yesterday beneath a picnic awning in a campground near Seneca Rocks, they and 12 other scrappy teens from the Academy at SOAR learned how to tie figure-eights and Prusiks, the knots that would safeguard their lives, under the tutelage of trip leader Joseph Geier, the academy's director, and seven other energetic field instructors mostly in their twenties. The students' ages span five years, but in the spectrum of puberty, the younger kids look like they could be the square roots of the biggest ones. Zack occupies an awkward middle ground, lanky and knock-kneed, with a surprisingly deep voice and a crooked smile.

He gradually moves his right foot to a new nub and pulls himself higher. He scrabbles upward, finally victoriously slapping a carabiner on the top rope before rappelling down. "Oh man, my arms hurt," he says at the bottom, his pale cheeks flushed from sun and exertion. Daniel accidentally steps on the climbing rope and, per the rules, has to kiss it. This happens so often that no one remarks on it. For a moment both boys cheer on Tim, a small boy from the D.C. area with bright eyes behind eyeglasses so thick they look like safety gear. The aspirational name tape on the back of his helmet reads T BONE SIZZLER. A group chant begins: "Go, Tim, go-oh, go Tim!"

Before enrolling in this adventure-based boarding school for grades seven through twelve, Zack, like a lot of these students, had already spent some summers at SOAR's Balsam, North Carolina, camp or its programs in California, Florida, and Wyoming for kids of both sexes with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities. SOAR's founding principle—radical several decades ago and still surprisingly underappreciated—was that kids with attention deficits thrive in the outdoors. Since then ADHD diagnoses have exploded—11 percent of American kids are now said to have it—while recess, PE, and access to nature have shriveled miserably.

Zack's first SOAR summer involved a three-week stint of horse-packing in the Wind River Range. Before the trip, he says, he would have preferred to stay home and play video games. "I hated nature," as he puts it. But something clicked under the wide Wyoming skies. He found he was able to focus on tasks; he was making friends and feeling less terrible about himself. Zack turned his restlessness into a craving for adventure—which is perhaps what it was meant to be all along.

IT'S ONE THING to let kids unplug and run loose in the woods in summer, but shifting the whole academic year outside—SOAR students alternate two weeks on the forested campus in North Carolina and two weeks

in the field-reflects either parental desperation, intrepid educational insight, or a combination of the two. Zack's backstory is a common one, especially among boys, who are diagnosed at more than twice the rate of girls. History is full of examples of restless youths who went on to become celebrated iconoclasts, like wilderness advocate John Muir, who spent his early childhood sneaking out at night, dangling from the windowsill by his fingertips, and scaling treacherous seaside cliffs in Dunbar, Scotland. Frederick Law Olmsted, who would later change the torso of Manhattan and influence scores of other cities with his park designs, hated school. His tolerant headmaster would let him roam the

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countryside instead. Ansel Adams's parents plucked their fidgety boy out of class, gave him a Brownie box camera, and took him on a grand tour of Yosemite. It was unschooling, California style.

Olmsted, looking back on his life, identified the problem as the stifling classroom, not troublesome boys. "A boy," he wrote, "who would not in any weather & under all ordinary circumstances, rather take a walk of ten to twelve miles some time in the course of every day than stay quietly about a house all day, must be suffering from disease or a defective education."

The Academy at SOAR-which became accredited three years ago-is determined to find a better way. The school has just 32 students, 26 of them boys, divided into four mixed-age houses. Each kid has an individualized curriculum, and the studentteacher ratio is five to one. Tuition is a steep \$49,500 per year, on par with other boarding schools, although you won't find a Hogwartsian dining hall or stacks of leather-bound books. The school still covers the required academics, as well as basic life skills like cooking, but finds that the kids pay more attention to a history lesson while standing in the middle of a battlefield or a geology lecture while camping on a monocline.

"We started from scratch," says SOAR's executive director John Willson, who began working there as a camp counselor in 1991. "We're not reinventing the wheel—we threw out the wheel." The school's founders didn't have any particular allegiance to adventure sports; they just found that climbing, backpacking, and canoeing were a magic fit for these kids, at these ages, when their neurons are exploding in a million directions. "When you're on a rock ledge," Willson says, "there's a sweet spot of arousal and stress that opens you up for adaptive learning. You find new ways of solving problems."

Some of the teens who arrive at SOAR are still putting their clothes on backward,

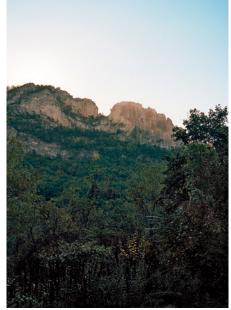
not uncommon among kids with ADHD. They forget to eat or they can't stop. They lash out in anger, and they're easily frustrated. Symptoms tend to express themselves differently in boys and girls. The classic symptoms in boys, which are better understood, are hyperactivity, impulsivity, and distractibility; girls tend to show less of the hyperactivity, which makes the condition harder to spot. We all fall somewhere on the continuum of these traits, but people with more-extreme symptoms

appear to have different chemistry in the parts of their brains that govern reward, movement, and attention. They may have trouble listening or sitting still, and they get distracted by external stimuli. They can be hyper-focused, but they also get bored easily, so they tend to be risk takers, looking for charged activities that help flood their brains with feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and norepinephrine, which otherwise get gummed up in the ADHD brain. Kids with the condition are more likely to suffer head injuries, accidentally ingest poisons, and take street drugs.

With all these liabilities, you might think such heritable traits would diminish in humans over time; that's the way Darwin awards work. The fact that they remain so common, though, means that these same characteristics must have once conferred tremendous advantages on individuals and ultimately on the human race.

It's worth taking a look into the brains of kids like Zack, because not only do kids with ADHD need exploration, but exploration needs them. Zack and his tethered band of misfits might look like merry miscreants, but they hold clues to the adventure impulses lurking in all of us, impulses that are increasingly at risk in a world moving indoors—onto















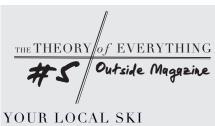




↑ CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Students ascending a pitch at Seneca Rocks, West Virginia; the North and South Peaks of Seneca Rocks; taking a break from learning rope skills; climbing the pitch; SOAR trip leader Joseph Geier; a knottying relay race; belaying a classmate; downtime in camp; practicing knots.

screens and away from nature. Attentional mutants everywhere have saved the human species, and they may yet spare us the death of adventure.

THE HUMAN BRAIN evolved outside, in a world filled with interesting things, but not an overwhelming number of interesting things. Everything in a child's world was nameable: foods, creatures, the stars. We were supposed to notice passing distractions; if we didn't, we could get eaten. But we also needed a cer-



YOUR LOCAL SKI AREA SHOULD BE A NONPROFIT

> It's no secret that small hills are having a tough go of it. Between tight budgets, changing weather, and ever expanding conglomerate resorts, the only way to survive may be to forgo the pursuit of cash and seek 501(c) status. "It helps on taxes, and it may create some additional opportunities to reinvest in the ski area as a local community asset," says Dave Byrd, director of risk management at the National Ski Areas Association. Take Antelope Butte in northern Wyoming. In 2011, when officials at Bighorn National Forest considered tearing down the facilities, locals created the nonprofit Antelope Butte Foundation to accept private funds; last September, the foundation made a \$55,000 down payment on the \$275,000 purchase price for the ski area. "It's ours to either make happen or not," says Andrew Gast, the foundation's executive director, who hopes to reopen the resort next winter. The move has already worked at smaller mountains like Ascutney in Vermont, Bogus Basin in Idaho, Mount Ashland in Oregon, and Bridger Bowl in Montana. At the former Hidden Valley ski area in New Jersey, the National Winter Activity Center, a nonprofit for teaching kids to ski and ride, will open for its first full season this winter. It's about more than nostalgia or keeping an affordable mountain nearby; it makes good economic sense, too. "Even for people who don't ski," Gast says, "people are excited about keeping

> > jobs right here."-REID SINGER

tain amount of stick-to-itiveness so that we could build tools, stalk game, raise babies, and plan big. Evolution favored early humans who could both stay on task and switch tasks when needed, and our prefrontal cortex evolved to let us master the ability. In fact, how nimbly we allocate our attention may be one of humanity's greatest and most distinctive skills, argues neuroscientist Daniel Levitin of McGill University.

Most humans had brains that craved novelty and wanted to explore—to a degree. This worked out for us. As Levitin writes in *The Organized Mind*, our species expanded into more habitats than any creature the earth had ever seen, to the point where humans plus our livestock and pets now account for 98 percent of the planet's terrestrial vertebrates. But evolution also favored variability, and some of us pushed exploration more than others.

Wondering if we have a specific adventure gene, researchers have looked at the DNA of humans in the farthest reaches of the globe—the descendants of people who kept moving until there was no place else to go. One mutation kept popping up: a variant called 7R on the DRD4 gene that helps

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regulate how signals from dopamine are processed. People with 7R are more likely to take financial risks and to travel and try new things, probably as a way to juice up their stingy dopamine delivery. Long story short, this gene mutation, which affects roughly 20 percent of today's global population, does indeed cluster in places like Siberia, Tierra del Fuego, and Australia, where humans had migrated over the longest routes.

It turns out that the gene also clusters in people who have ADHD. It would be too easy to say that any one gene or set of genes explains the human capacity to explore or explains ADHD, since both are determined by numerous genetic and environmental factors. And not all kids with ADHD like risk taking. But to Dale Archer, a Lake Charles, Louisiana, psychiatrist and author of *The*

ADHD Advantage, the link makes sense. Once upon a time, the dominant traits of ADHD were highly adaptive. They wereand still can be-gifts that enable rapid interpretation of sensory data, thinking on your feet, curiosity, and creative restlessness. "The thing with the ADHDer is that we get bored easily but we do great in a crisis, we can function really well," says Archer, a surf kayaker, solo sailor, and cyclist who shares the diagnosis with his adult son. According to him and others in the learning-differences community, Napoleon probably had ADHD (along with some other issues) and so did Captain James Cook, Ernest Shackleton, Thomas Edison, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

If you take a typical ADHD kid, layer on some experience and maturity, tamp down the impulsive bits, and add some goal aspirations and a keen ability to plan and dream, you end up with a high-adrenaline achiever like alpinist Conrad Anker or adventurer Sir Richard Branson, both of whom believe they have the condition. They are comfortable in extreme environments, enlivened by risk, able to thrive on the unknown. When Branson dropped out of school at age 16 to

start his first company, he says, "The headmaster told me that I would either end up in prison or become a millionaire." Since then he has scored two first-ever transoceanic ballooning records, received eight helicopter rescues, and founded the Virgin Group.

"I am hyper situationally aware," says Anker. "It was a trainwreck in second grade—every input received my attention. When I'm alpine climbing, that keeps me alive." Anker can nimbly process snow conditions, incoming

weather, and rope integrity to make quick decisions. His brain likes intense environments, he says, but too much pointless stimulation, like on a busy city street, drives him bananas. Precision wingsuit flier Jeb Corliss was diagnosed with ADHD when he was ten. "My sisters are normal people. I'm hyper, yeah, big deal," he says. "I believe that a lot of people are like that, and they use it to their advantage." Corliss says flying through the air is when he feels calm and peaceful.

As a laconic, impulsive, and depressed teen in northeast Ohio, Matt Rutherford landed in juvenile detention five times for petty crimes and in rehab twice. Some 15 years later, he became the first sailor to circumnavigate the Americas alone. During his 308 days at sea, his secondhand 27-foot boat started falling apart under **continued on page 97** \Rightarrow



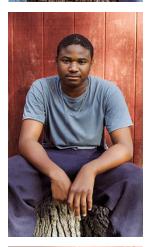




























two years she returned to work and resumed some hiking and skiing. Today she's a radiologist in the hospital where she was saved, and she lectures at conferences about the potential to rescue others like her. She gets annoyed when she reads in the newspaper that a person was found in the cold and declared dead before they were taken to the hospital and rewarmed. "The most important thing is to not declare people dead outside. If it's possible, start CPR, take them into the hospital, put them on ECMO, and rewarm them with everything you've got. Don't give up. Even if it looks like the person is not going to make it, you have to keep on until it's really over."

Doug Brown, who emphasizes that doctors should use ECMO only when they believe a patient has a good chance for survival—that is, those like Christine Newman and Bagenholm who became severely cold before cardiac arrest—has created a group in British Columbia to establish clinical-practice guidelines for hypothermia. "Change in health care is very frustrating," he says. "Most places in the U.S. don't have protocols in place for getting hypothermic cardiac-arrest patients to ECMO."

Newman hasn't given any interviews about her accident, but she did release a You-Tube video last March, near the one-year anniversary, in which she thanked her rescuers. Aside from some cold sensitivity in her hands and a few scars, including two on her thighs from the ECMO procedure and one on her back from being pulled out of the ice, she said she's feeling good and doing most of the things she has always enjoyed.

For Bagenholm, it took some time to fully grasp what had happened to her. She remembers waking up in the hospital after her accident. "I was paralyzed from the neck down, so I couldn't move," she says. Although she could remember other things about her life, the accident was a blank. "You know when you have a computer and you write on it, and then suddenly the power is out, everything on the hard drive is still there, but the things on the screen are gone. That's how it was for me," she says. "Everything I'd saved was still there, but the things that happened that day were gone. I still don't remember."

Bagenholm's case is often trumpeted as a miracle, but she doesn't believe her rescue was foreordained. "It's not a miracle," she says. "It's physiology. The miracle is that we've learned that it's possible to save people like me."

RENE EBERSOLE IS A WRITER AND EDITOR AT AUDUBON. HER WORK HAS ALSO APPEARED IN NAUTILUS AND MENTAL FLOSS, AMONG OTHERS.

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him. It caught on fire, he lost his water supply, his fuel bladder sprang a leak, and, just past French Guiana, he nearly smacked into a freighter. "The more challenging it is," he says, "the happier I am. The more rocks, the more ice, the better."

In fact, ADHD traits are so common among modern-day alpinists, rock climbers, BASE jumpers, snowboarders, and other extreme athletes that the observation raises several important questions: If adventure sports are such a great fit for people with ADHD, why aren't more doctors, schools, and families boosting participation? And, as kids are asked to sit still for longer periods of time indoors and given more medications to help them do it, what is the fate of the next generation of adventurers? Does the mass medicalization of ADHD mean the human species has reached peak exploration?

IF YOU'RE THE sort of person who eats chaos for breakfast, sitting in school all day may well suck out your soul. But with the rise of industrialism, educators thought all kids should be in standardized classrooms. "ADHD got its start 150 years ago when compulsory education got started," says Stephen Hinshaw, a psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley. "In that sense, you could say it's partially a social construct. If you look at the symptoms of ADHD, maybe they're not really symptoms anymore if you get in the right profession or the right ecological niche. We've learned some of this by looking at extreme athletes, who have found that niche."

But school often isn't it. To oversimplify, it's like taking kids who are genetically meant to be hunters and gatherers and making them tend crops instead. Not only will they feel bored and inadequate, but the constrained setting will actually make their symptoms worse. For kids like Zack, school feels stifling and rule bound. They act up. They may get moved into even more restrictive environments, sometimes with chain-link fences, guards, and neurotropic meds that go beyond ADHD to deal with the ensuing anxiety, depression, and aggression. Sometimes they

end up in trouble or, as Zack feared might happen to him, get "gooned" in the middle of the night by burly strangers intent on packing him off to a residential therapeutic program that looks like Outward Bound in the brochure but ends up feeling like a gulag.

Interestingly, researchers have observed similar patterns in lab rats—who, let's face it, suffer the ultimate cosmic gooning. When Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist at Washington State University, restricted the play of young rats, their frontal lobes (which control executive function) failed to grow normally. "We had the insight that if animals don't play, if there are not sufficient spaces for them to engage, they develop play hunger," says Panksepp. "They have impulse-control problems and eventually problems with social interactions."

Panksepp points out that while common stimulant medications for ADHD like Ritalin and Adderall may improve attention skills and academic performance in many kids, they do so at the cost of reducing the playfulness urge - at least temporarily. "We know these are anti-play drugs in animals," he says. "That is clear and unambiguous." The bigger question is whether the drugs-and all the enforced sedentary behavior-squeeze the adventure impulse out of kids in the longer term. Psychologists tend to disagree on this point, but the truth is, no one really knows. It's not a boutique question. Of the 6.4 million diagnosed kids in America, about half are taking prescription stimulants, an increase of 28 percent since 2007.

For athletes like Corliss and swimmer Michael Phelps, who has also been diagnosed with ADHD, the sport itself becomes their medication, filling their brains with endorphins and endocannabinoids. But for every hour that a drug is supplying a kid's fix, that's an hour a potential explorer is not looking longingly out the window plotting escape. Of course, some kids, Hinshaw points out, need medication even to make big plans, not to mention learn algebra. Other families, he notes, are seeing the value in medication holidays, allowing kids to come off their drugs on weekends and during summers.

At SOAR, many students arrive on meds, and many stay on them. At all times, the instructors have locked and sealed messenger bags full of pharmaceuticals strapped to their torsos like baby marsupials. Though Willson emphasizes that SOAR is not a way to get kids off ADHD meds, some do find that they can taper off. Zack's parents said they're planning to toss his during his holiday break, and they expect to lower the dose of his stimulant as well. "The changes in him have been nothing short of miraculous," says his mother, Marlene De Pecol. "Now he's just happy."

ADHD

Taking meds didn't seem to alter the daring trajectory of solo sailor Rutherford. He took multiple pills for six years until he was 16, when, like Zack, he managed to find a place more compatible with his brain's wiring-the Eagle Rock School in Estes Park, Colorado, an adventure-based boarding school funded by the American Honda Education Corporation. Anker, meanwhile, says it's possible he wouldn't be making first ascents today if he'd taken Ritalin through his teenage years. His parents encouraged him to go outside instead. Climbing developed his technical mastery while helping him sit still when he needed to. It also likely helped his prefrontal cortex mature. The senior Ankers were ahead of the curve, or perhaps about 10,000 years behind the curve, depending on how you look at it.

The fact is, all human children learn by exploration, and we are tying their shoelaces together—not just with medication, but through over-structured, over-managed classrooms and sports teams, less freedom to roam, and ever more dazzling indoor seductions. Modern life has made all of us distractible and overwhelmed. As McGill's Levitin explains, the average American owns and must keep track of thousands of times more possessions than the average huntergatherer. Each of us, one 2013 study projected, consumes 74 gigabytes daily. Teens now interact with screens more than six and a half hours per day, and that's not including time at school, according to Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that helps parents make smart technology choices. "The digital age is profoundly narrowing our horizons and our creativity, not to mention our bodies and physiological capabilities," says environmental photographer James Balog, even as his hard-won chronicles of a changing planet are delivered to millions digitally. Yet Balog, who says he has mild ADHD, can hardly get his eighth-grade daughter off her phone. "These are hours not being spent outside," he says. "It kills me."

The news isn't all bad. While per capita visits to natural areas are down, participation by young people in a number of adventure sports like snowboarding and rock climbing is up. Solid research continues to make the case that kids benefit from time outside and regular exercise, and some schools are getting the message by instituting earlymorning programs. More psychiatrists are also prescribing exercise for kids with ADHD. But the National Institute of Mental Health makes no mention of physical activity as a treatment option on its extensive website.

The radio silence on exercise is surprising, because studies consistently show that

aerobic activity targets the same attentional networks that ADHD medication does. While fitness improves learning in both kids and adults, it's adolescents like Zack-whose prefrontal cortex is in the very midst of laying down a lifetime of hardware-who seem to benefit the most. John Green, a biobehavioral psychologist at the University of Vermont, and graduate student Meghan Eddy exercised some adult and juvenile rats and then tasked them with learning how to find food in a maze. The young rats who exercised bested the non-exercisers and did as well as rats on Ritalin. It seemed the playful and exploratory adolescent years exist to boost learning in mammals, just as SOAR's Willson intuited. Or, as Green more formally puts it, "The adolescent prefrontal cortex is ready to be molded by environmental experience."

So there you have it: the time is now. There's a limited window to best launch these kids and, perhaps in so doing, safeguard a future of innovative exploration by the very young people who are wired to do it better than anybody else.

The ADHD population is an advance guard. If they can recognize how to better adapt their environments for their brains, there's hope for the rest of us.

AFTER MANY YEARS languishing in the Formica-filled classrooms of West Hartford, Zack Smith is ready. He and his pals gather around the fire pit back at camp, bellies full of hamburgers and pickles. It's very dark out. Tomorrow all 14 boys will make the four pitches up the South Peak at Seneca Rocks. A couple of days after that, they'll backpack across the Dolly Sods Wilderness Area, and then they'll visit Stonewall Jackson's grave and read poetry written by the general's sister-in-law. For now, they're tired if not exactly mellow.

Zack's job for the day is Captain Planet, meaning he's the mighty taker-out of trash. Another kid named Max is Scribe. At 16, Max is an expeller of colossal farts, and proud of it. "I don't do anything halfway in the outdoors," he says. He shared with me on the trail that he is also an expert squirrel hunter, climber, and river runner. When he is done with school, he intends to find a job guiding. Now, be-turbaned in a purple bandana, he opens the group journal and prepares to record notes on the day's events under the narrow red beam of a headlamp.

Zack is lying on his back and looking up at the stars. He is impressed. "We don't have these at home," he says.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FLORENCE
WILLIAMS IS THE AUTHOR OF BREASTS:
A NATURAL AND UNNATURAL HISTORY.

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probably of greater benefit to the planet than mine. I also consider the irony that I flew to Halifax to report a story on sustainability, the equivalent of eating roughly 40 pounds of steak.

Sustainability, it seems, is a little like religion: we're all striving for an ideal, but it's difficult, if not impossible, to achieve perfection. We sin a little here. We sin a little there. The omnivore who hunts for an elk each fall for his meat—or maybe even eats roadkill—and raises his own chickens for eggs, grows his own organic vegetables and fruit, and cans food for the winter is eating pretty damn sustainably. So is the backyard-gardening vegan. But that's a degree of virtue many of us will never achieve.

Still, a few simple adjustments help a lot. Stop worrying so much about not getting enough protein, and remember that plant-based protein is a lot easier on the planet than animal protein. Buy organic food whenever you can. Source your food as locally as possible, and eat seasonally to avoid racking up major food miles. Eat less and waste less. Be open-minded and creative about new cuisines. Relax. Have fun. Sustainable eating isn't synonymous with masochism.

"We think of everything related to the environment as something we are doing wrong or have to give up," Dan Barber says. "But people can do something about it in a way that is pleasurable. We can actualize change through hedonism."

Who can't rally behind that?

CORRESPONDENT TIM ZIMMERMANN WROTE ABOUT SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD IN JUNE 2015.

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