FAKE-TREE DISORDER:

Take a good look at your Christmas tree (if you have one). If it's real and if a child can see it, smell it and touch it, then you are helping to fight against a serious emerging problem in America: Nature Deficit Disorder.

That catchy phrase comes from the subtitle of Richard Louv's acclaimed 2005 book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." His thesis is that kids' access to electronic technology, combined with growing parental fears about the outdoors, are creating children who are increasingly detached from nature, thereby impoverishing their intellectual, spiritual and physical health.

I agree. So, for New Year's, resolve not only to shed a few extra pounds, but to shed yourself of that fake tree as well, assuming you have one, which most Americans now do. This way kids can still live their lives as electronic shut-ins, yet be in the presence of something natural.

Consider the child's intellect. An authentic tree, especially the bent branches, brown patches and inexplicable gaps, is far more interesting than a perfectly proportioned petrochemical pine. Consider the child's moral development. Watching a living thing being cut by a saw -- or knowing that this happened -- teaches them that death is real, not fake. Each authentic tree is an individual. Synthetic ones are cloned by the thousands and denied the opportunity for growth, maturity and decline. Where's the learning in that?

In my family, each Christmas tree has its own story. We remember the green runt, the lopped top, the charity purchase, the total rip-off, the best buy, the Connecticut chain saw massacre and the time when the language-challenged salesman thought that "sprucefirpine" was a type of tree. If a family is defined by its stories, then taking fake trees out of dark closets need not be one of them.

The spiritual lives of children are governed by the senses. They benefit from resinous smells and the prickly touch of needles. If the point of a Christmas tree is to bring indoors a symbol of life during the solstice's dark days, then why haul down from the attic an oversized green toilet brush? Kids don't need another aseptic anything to stare at as it were a high-definition digital image. They need immersion within the loving arms of nature's multisensory experience.

Finally, there is the physicality of getting a tree from somewhere else. Every kid, especially those who are obese from inactivity, would be better off romping around a Christmas tree farm than spending another hour with the surrogate play called electronics.

Of course, I do understand why the majority of Americans favor fake trees. For some, it's about their work. Like the chef who doesn't cook at home, the last thing my arborist -- who trims and wrestles trees for a living -- wants to do on the holiday is to drag his work home. Then there are the physically disabled, those allergic to conifers, those whose landlords or condominium covenants won't allow a real tree, or those who love trees too much to cut one down, even from a tree-farm monoculture. (Perhaps they should try a potted tree.)

For most, however, it's the same old trade-off between modern convenience and authenticity. They're just too busy to bother with reality.

This is a bad message for kids. Fake reality creates partially fake children, amazed less by real life than besotted by the mesmerizing, often inappropriate power of the Internet. This isn't just a teen or
tween (ages 8 to 12) phenomenon. Last week I talked with a mother of a 4-year old boy who felt her son was socially disadvantaged because he didn't own a Game Boy.

Please help counteract Nature-Deficit Disorder. If you insist on keeping your fake tree, then please take some time next year to nudge a kid outdoors. They will become smarter, happier and more respectful of the earth.