

Nature and Youth Development: Advocacy and Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2005 publication of Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, the topic of youths' interaction with nature have become a hot topic nationally. A growing body of literature has identified numerous benefits that arise when youth spend time in contact with nature including:

- Increased concentration skills among kids with ADD (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001)
- Greater self-discipline among girls (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2002)
- Increased physical activity (Hinkley, Crawford, Salmon, Okely, & Hesketh, 2008)
- Lower body mass indices (Bell, Wilson, & Liu, 2008)
- Reduced stress levels (Wells & Evans, 2003)
- Increased cognitive functioning (Wells, 2000)

Unfortunately, research also suggests that youth spend less time playing outside than their parents (Clements, 2004) and are increasingly filling their free time with electronic media (Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). These trends are particularly alarming when coupled with rising adolescent obesity statistics (Ogden et al., 2006) and links between media usage and low physical activity patterns (Anderson, Economos, & Must, 2008). While such findings paint a bleak picture, evidence suggests that at least part of the solution to these problems may be as simple as getting kids outside more and interacting with nature. The following sections provide practitioners access to important research findings to use when advocating for increased efforts to reconnect youth with nature and practical suggestions for how this can be accomplished.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Youth can experience a variety of benefits when they spend time in nature.
2. Research findings indicate that youth are spending decreasing amounts of time in nature.
3. There are a variety of barriers keeping kids from spending more time outside.
4. Simply providing youth more access to green space and green views can bring significant benefits.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Youth stand to experience a variety of benefits when they spend time in nature.

Evidence suggests that youth benefit from being outside in nature (Loge, 2009; Taylor & Kuo, 2006). Research findings indicate that youth with ADD exhibit fewer symptoms after spending time outside (Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004). Youth who spend more time outside

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are more likely to be physically active (Hinkley et al., 2008) and have fewer cases of myopia (Rose et al., 2008) than their sedentary peers. The benefits of nature exposure at an early age appear to extend into adulthood, e.g., the amount of time children spend in green spaces can be used to predict adult green space visitation rates (Thompson, Aspinall, & Montarzino, 2008) and environmental beliefs (Ewert, Place, & Sibthorp, 2005). It is also important to note that kids can connect to nature in their own backyards, city parks, or school grounds. Just because some kids do not have access to wilderness areas does not mean they cannot benefit from nature. Consult the Additional Resources section at the end of this brief for more sources on this topic.

Research findings indicate that youth are spending decreasing amounts of time in nature.

Findings indicate that youth are becoming increasingly separated from nature. They spend more time at friends' houses and less time in natural places than their parents did when they were young (England Marketing, 2009). Youth appear to know more about Pokémon characters than plants and animals (Balmford, Clegg, Coulson, & Taylor, 2002). Analyses of youth environmental attitudes and behavior indicate declining trends since the early 1990s (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood, 2009). Other national data corroborate these findings. For example, National Park visitation rates have declined since 1988 (Pergams & Zaradic, 2006) as have youth participation rates in outdoor activities (The Outdoor Foundation, 2008).

There are a variety of barriers keeping kids from spending more time outside.

What's keeping kids inside? Part of the reason is the draw of electronic media. There are also a variety of parental concerns related to safety and stranger danger that act as constraints on children's outdoor play opportunities (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006). Accordingly, youth in general appear to have a smaller area in which they can freely roam outside than earlier generations (Hillman & Adams, 1990). Practitioners need to be aware of these concerns and work to provide strategies to negotiate them. For example, youth are more likely to visit parks and other public spaces in areas that are perceived as safe and are pedestrian friendly (Grow et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that increasing youth's mobility will lead to more time being spent outside (Wen, Kite, Merom, & Rissel, 2009).

Simply providing youth more access to green space and green views can bring significant benefits.

One potentially effective strategy to increase youth's connection with nature and facilitate the attendant benefits is to simply increase children's opportunities to view green space. Building upon research that indicates patients recover more quickly when they can see green space (e.g., trees, bushes, etc.) from their hospital windows (Ulrich, 1984), researchers have found that green space around schools (Matsuoka, 2008), apartments (Wells, 2000) and neighborhoods (Wells & Evans, 2003) provides a host of benefits from improved academic performance to decreased stress levels. Schools that have intentionally attempted to "green up" their school grounds have observed increased physical activity among their students (Dymont & Bell, 2008) and greener neighborhoods have been shown to have youth with lower body mass indices (Bell et al., 2008). Practitioners should consider options to enhance the green space views from their own facilities to facilitate associated benefits for their own youth participants.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While many of the problems associated with children's disconnect with nature (e.g., obesity, electronic-media dominated free time, etc.) may seem daunting, solutions exist. However, focusing on small initial steps may help move forward in solving the problem. The following ideas should serve as suggestions and general principles which you can implement and build upon in your own programs:

- Find ways to provide the kids you work with a "daily dose of nature." For example, youth with ADD exhibit increased concentration skills after only a 20-minute walk in the park (Taylor & Kuo, 2009). Use this concept to assess your current program offerings in order to identify areas where contact with nature can be incorporated into your current programming efforts.
- Increase the "greenness of your facilities." This could include making the views from your facilities more green and creating natural green places outside where youth can spend time.
- Check out the Children and Nature Network website (www.childrenandnature.org). They have a wealth of information regarding research, advocacy, and programming ideas.
- Practitioners should also reach out to parents, elected officials and other community leaders to communicate the

benefits that come when youth spend time outdoors. As noted by Richard Louv, the topic of reconnecting youth to nature promotes consensus and collaborations across diverse groups.

Small, simple steps can make a difference. Focus on daily doses of nature and build from there. Youth workers can play an important role in facilitating a reconnection between the youth they work with and nature. They can also serve as advocates in their communities to increase awareness of the benefits associated with getting kids outside. While the current situation may seem bleak, there are exciting and effective steps that can be taken to reconnect our youth with the world outside.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

While the exponential growth in nature and youth development research and initiatives is encouraging, more research is needed to evaluate and identify best nature and youth development practices. Accordingly, starting small in your efforts to promote youth development through connecting kids to nature is a promising strategy. This will allow practitioners to experience success without feeling overwhelmed and allow time for more evidence based programming to emerge.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Children and Nature Network (www.cnaturenet.org)

No Child Left Inside Coalition (www.nclicoalition.org)

National Environmental Education Foundation Fact Sheet on the Health Benefits of the Natural Environment (<http://www.neefusa.org/assets/files/NIFactSheet.pdf>)

Lester, S., & Maudsley, M. (2006). "Play, naturally: A review of children's natural play." Children's Play Council. (<http://www.playday.org.uk/PDF/play-naturally-a-review-of-childrens-natural%20play.pdf>)

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