

Children, Nature, and the Importance of Getting Kids Outside

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Narrator: Welcome to Environmental Health Chat, a podcast about how the environment affects our health, from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Division of Extramural Research and Training.

Today's children may be the first generation at risk of having shorter lifespans than their parents. Evidence suggests that modern sedentary indoor lifestyles and use of electronic devices have contributed to increased health problems in childhood. Talking with us today is Leyla McCurdy, a leading health professional with more than 20 years of experience in public and environmental health education and outreach. McCurdy served as the Senior Director of Health and Environment at the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF), and is currently the Chair of the Children's Environmental Health Committee at the American Public Health Association (APHA).

McCurdy says that over the past few decades, childhood obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, asthma, attention deficit disorders, and vitamin D deficiency have all increased dramatically, and these problems have been linked to our children's lifestyles.

McCurdy: Sedentary lifestyle and physical inactivity have contributed greatly to the many health problems impacting today's children. Outdoor activity in natural environments has decreased tremendously due to growth in electronic media such as television, video games, cell phones, the computer, and a demanding school work and extracurricular schedule. Kids are losing contact with the natural environment and missing key opportunities for physical activity, stress reduction, attention restoration, and healthy development.

Narrator: The good news is that many of these health problems are reversible. There is a growing body of evidence showing the health benefits of spending time in nature. McCurdy sees this as an opportunity for making lifelong changes and improving children's health. She and her colleagues recently published a review paper discussing the growing body of literature demonstrating the health benefits of spending time in nature. For example, in one study, children who lived within 1 kilometer of a park with a playground were 5 times more likely to have a healthy weight than those who did not. But McCurdy noted that time outdoors was not just associated with improved physical health, but also with improved mental health. In another study, children in grades 3 through 5 had lower levels of stress with increasing exposure to nature. In fact, the greatest improvements from spending time in nature were found in children who had the highest levels of stressful events in their lives.

In order to make the case for this important public health issue and move it forward, one of the priority actions of the Building Healthy Communities Committee that Leyla co-founded at the APHA, was to develop a policy statement on the issue of nature and health. Entitled "Improving Health and Wellness through Access to Nature", the statement calls on health professionals to raise awareness among patients and the public about the health benefits of spending time in nature.

McCurdy: The APHA policy statement is a call to action to all segments of our society on this very important issue of improving children's health through access to nature. The policy statement summarizes evidence that routine access to nature in parks, gardens, green

neighborhoods and other natural areas, results in multiple health benefits for people of all ages, income levels, and ethnicities.

Narrator: Since people are more likely to spend time outdoors and use open spaces that have trees and playgrounds, lack of access to green spaces is an important factor leading to health disparities in the population.

McCurdy: Many low income and minority children are often more cut off from nature due to the built environment around them. They face poor housing conditions, high volume traffic, and a lack of parks and green spaces in their communities.

Narrator: One of the important recommendations of the APHA policy statement is to prioritize access to natural areas and green spaces in land use decisions. Such changes could reduce social and economic disparities and improve health outcomes in many communities.

As researchers have begun to understand the link between health and spending time outdoors, it has spurred a nationwide movement to incorporate outdoor play, visits to parks, and other nature-based activities into the prevention and treatment of disease. McCurdy has been at the forefront of this movement. For example, she led an initiative with the National Environmental Education Foundation to educate health care providers about the health benefits of nature for children, and prepare them to serve as nature champions in their communities.

McCurdy: The National Environmental Education Foundation's Children and Nature Initiative aims to prevent serious health conditions like obesity and diabetes related to indoor sedentary lifestyles, and connects children and their families to nature to promote good health, enjoyment, and environmental stewardship.

Narrator: The Children and Nature Initiative is part of a growing national effort that has been gaining momentum with support of federal agencies, health professionals, researchers, and others.

McCurdy: Recently I had the privilege of participating in a White House round table about the health benefits of the outdoors. The round table brought together several experts and leaders in the field. It created a forum for different sectors working on this topic to learn from each other and provided an opportunity to explore how we can all work together.

Narrator: From the U.S. Surgeon General's office and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to non-profit groups, the movement to connect people with nature to improve health and wellness continues to grow. For example, the National Institutes of Health "We Can" initiative, and the National Parks Service "Healthy Parks Healthy People" initiative, have been very successful in encouraging children and families to be active outdoors. Another initiative people may be familiar with is "Let's Move!"

McCurdy: First Lady Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' as well as 'Let's Move Outside' initiative have been a driving force in bringing people together in many communities to fight childhood obesity and have kids spend active time outdoors in natural environments. Everyone has a role to play in the effort to connect children with nature. Like any other behavior change efforts, people need to hear it from multiple sources. I believe programs like theirs along with other collective work is elevating and growing the movement to connect children and their families with nature to improve their health and the health of the planet.

Narrator: As people begin to spend more time in nature they will reap the many health benefits, and also have increased opportunities for social interaction leading to more vibrant communities with more emphasis on environmental stewardship.

You can find more information about the APHA policy statement and the NEEF Children and Nature Initiative, as well as resources for connecting children with nature on our website niehs.nih.gov/podcasts.

Thanks to today's guest Leyla McCurdy.

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