

No Child Left Indoors!

Reconnecting Children With Nature



A grassroots movement advocating outdoor play in nature is spreading across the United States as a growing body of research reveals a strong link between children's experiences of being outdoors in nature and their psychological well-being and overall development. This movement is partly a response to the fact that as our culture has become increasingly sedentary, so have our children. And studies are showing some disturbing trends:

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently estimated that 32% of American children are overweight and that approximately 60 percent of obese children ages five to ten have at least one cardiovascular disease risk factor. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported an upward trend in high blood pressure in children ages eight to eighteen (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; and Muntner, He, Cutler, Wildman, Whelton, JAMA, 2004). The percentage of children who live within a mile of school and who walk or bike to school has declined nearly 25 percent. Today, barely 21 percent of children live within one mile of their school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Children between the ages of six months and six years spend an average of 1.5 hours a day with electronic media, and youths between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day with electronic media—that's more than 45 hours a week. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005 and 2006). These facts help highlight how the design of our communities affect children's opportunities for outdoor physical activity and an appreciation for our natural environment.

Nature contact yields surprisingly broad benefits. This contact may occur on a very small scale — plants in the workplace (Heerwagen et al., 1995) or trees outside the apartment building — or it may occur on a larger scale — a nearby park, a riparian corridor in a city, or a wilderness area. Spending time in nature can:

- Reduce Stress
- Make children more focused
- Enhance children's emotional and social development
- Improve school performance
- Enhance creativity, problem solving ability, self esteem, and self control
- Improve cognitive ability
- Improve health



As Landscape Architects, we can help to develop and foster places and spaces that provide children the opportunity to engage with nature. Neighborhoods and communities can be designed to provide opportunities for recreational physical activity with parks and open spaces, where children engage in physical activity as a part of their daily lives. A generation ago playing outdoors in nature was usually taken for granted; but times have changed. Now, nature must be deliberately designed back into children's lives. In today's urban and suburban environments, natural spaces are often too remotely located for visiting on a regular basis. Additionally, factors such as school location have played a significant role in the decreased rates of walking to school. Environment modification that addresses risks associated with automobile traffic is likely to be conducive to more walking and biking among children. Actions that reduce parental perception and fear of crime may promote outdoor physical

activity. Design and policies that promote more active lifestyles among children and adolescents will enable them to achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

One way of bringing nature back into children's lives is by integrating playgrounds with the living landscape. The common industrial playground model that is based solely on manufactured equipment must be replaced by sensitively designed environments that is conducive to a diversity of play opportunities that can meet the needs of a broader range of children and their families. Integrating nature into our playgrounds creates a richer play experience and provides some of the benefits of time spent in nature.

One example of this new paradigm of playground design is located in Cary, North Carolina where a 1 ¾ acre park was designed to contain many innovative settings and features. The design of the park was the product of community workshops involving children and adults. The outcome is a universally designed park called Kids Together Park (KTP) that accommodates a wide spectrum of recreational needs, including gross and fine motor development, sensory stimulation, resting, nature contemplation, social gathering, and a friendly environment for children and adults with various abilities. Additionally, local artists contributed to the overall aesthetic appeal of the playground by designing benches as art objects and a dragon-like sculpture that rises out of a hillside.

For more information on this park, please visit: <http://www.kidstogethercary.org./index.htm>

For more information on the No Child Left Indoors initiative, please visit:

The Children & Nature Network (<http://www.childrenandnature.org>) which was created to encourage and support the people and organizations working nationally and internationally to reconnect children with nature. The network provides a critical link between researchers and individuals, educators and organizations dedicated to children's health and well-being.

