

Where the Kids Aren't

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Physical activity in children is on the decline, and this is particularly apparent in public parks. Now, NC State researchers are studying urban parks and how they are being used – or not used – by local residents, particularly in disadvantaged communities which are at higher risk for obesity.

Most people associate summer with childhood memories of beach vacations, playing sports, spending time at the pool, or just hanging around with friends. But it might surprise you to discover that kids today have a somewhat different summer experience, and that outdoor activity is pretty far down on the list; so far down, in fact, that kids often find themselves heading back to school in August in worse physical shape than when they left in May.

Obviously, encouraging children to be more physically active is one way to solve this problem. Researchers from North Carolina State University are looking into the relationship between children, physical activity and public park usage to determine how this public resource might be utilized to help us combat the sedentary lifestyle that can lead to childhood obesity.

Robin Moore, professor of landscape architecture in NC State's College of Design, and Dr. Jason Bocarro, assistant professor of parks, recreation and tourism management in NC State's College of Natural Resources, are part of a team studying urban parks and how they are being used – or not used – by local residents, particularly in disadvantaged communities which are at higher risk for obesity.

“When you ask yourself why children aren’t using their local parks, you end up with a lot of contributing factors,” Bocarro says. “Children nowadays have a lot of demands on their time: sports, planned activities, homework, as well as TV and the computer. In addition, parents are concerned about their safety, and are a lot less likely now to allow children to roam unsupervised through a park, or through a neighborhood to get to a park.”

“Even getting to the park can be a challenge now,” Moore adds. “You have to factor in traffic patterns, street interconnectedness and the accessibility of the park. Traffic really is a major obstacle to park accessibility.”

A grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will be used to study park usage in Durham, which was selected because it’s an urban environment with a very high concentration of parks in the central area of the city. The researchers hope that their analysis will aid city planners in helping local residents get the most out of their parks.

“This summer we’ll start doing the data gathering,” Moore says. “We’ll be conducting focus groups within the community as well as studying who comes to the park, and what activities they engage in while they’re there. The following year will be devoted to data analysis, and then we hope to present a set of recommendations to community planners.”

“And it’s not just about studying how they get there – we also want to look at ways to make parks and recreational programming attractive to kids, and to increase parents’ comfort levels,” Bocarro says. “We have these great free, local resources that can really give kids a connection to community and help them get and stay healthy. It would be a crime not to use them to their fullest potential.”

Source: NC State University

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