

Modern conflict: Screen time vs. nature

October 22 2018, by Matt Shipman



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Even rural kids today spend more time in front of screens and less time outdoors, according to a new study of middle-school students in South Carolina.

Researchers at North Carolina State University and Clemson University

found that gaps between [screen time](#) and outdoor time were most pronounced for girls, African American students, and eighth graders.

"Middle school can be a turning point for many activities because priorities shift and young people's lives become more and more structured. This often results in fewer opportunities for outdoor recreation," says Lincoln Larson, assistant professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at NC State, and co-author of a journal article about the research. "This is a problem because connection to nature plays a positive role in young people's physical health and psychological development."

"We want to understand how recreation choices might influence youth at this formative time," added Edmond Bowers, associate professor of youth development leadership at Clemson University and a co-author on the study. "Research on the impact of electronic media such as smartphones on youth development is just emerging, and the findings for well-being are mixed. A more holistic examination of youth activities could shed light on the benefits and costs of recreational choices."

Researchers asked about 550 rural students to report the amount of time they spend in nature (outdoor time) and the amount of time they spend using electronic media (screen time) over an average week. They found that screen time eclipsed outdoor time for most students, and that these gaps increased significantly in older youth.

"We understand that technology is an integral part of life for middle-school students, so this isn't an attempt to scapegoat screen time. But it's clear that we need to find ways to balance outdoor activities and electronic media," Larson says. Pokemon Go, for example, was a screen-based phenomenon that also got people moving outdoors.

Concerns about safety, particularly among girls and their parents, may

influence students' time in nature as well, he adds. "Issues related to safety and access create barriers to [outdoor recreation](#) for diverse urban [youth](#)," Larson says, "but this study shows that time in nature may be slipping even among rural students."

"We're not going back in [time](#) when it comes to nature and [electronic media](#). They're now intertwined," Larson says. "The question becomes, how do we find ways to effectively integrate nature and technology? Can we design programs or experiences that appeal to [young people's](#) inherent love for technology, but also get them outdoors to improve to their lifelong health?"

The study appears in *Environment and Behavior*.

More information: Lincoln R. Larson et al, Outdoor Time, Screen Time, and Connection to Nature: Troubling Trends Among Rural Youth?, *Environment and Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0013916518806686](#)

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