

Girls and women need more time in nature to be healthy

November 9 2018, by Rebecca Spencer And Sara Fl Kirk



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Supporting girls and women in their efforts to be physically active must become a global [public health priority](#). Preliminary results from our research at Dalhousie University suggests that access to nature may be key to achieving this.

A recent study in [*The Lancet Global Health*](#) pooled global data from the past 15 years and showed persistent and worrying trends: Women continue to get insufficient [physical activity](#), and the gap between [activity](#) levels of women and men is widening.

Similar trends are seen in [girls](#) aged 12 to 17. Only [two per cent meet the requirements of the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#) —which include adequate sleep and at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.

Our own [review of the evidence](#) also found that girls have complex relationships with physical activity, requiring an ongoing negotiation of gender roles and stereotypes. They have to navigate cultural narratives focused on the "body" in many parts of their lives every day. They are expected to be pretty but to appear [natural](#), to be thin but not too skinny, to be fit but not too muscular.

We are currently engaged in research to explore the [health](#) of adolescent girls and young women through a technique called [photovoice](#), in which participants take photographs to represent their own experiences.



A participant shows some of the photographs she submitted. Credit: Kylee Nunn Photography, Author provided

Flowers, trees, and water

In this study we asked seven research participants to take photos to explore their health, nutrition, and physical activity experiences and to bring them back to discuss in a group, and look for themes or trends.

They found themes relating to challenging norms and stereotypes and to the importance of social support and confidence. They discussed their perceptions that "everything is gendered" and that there are activities girls are "supposed to do." They talked about sometimes feeling excluded from sports dominated by boys, and expectations around what

girls should wear while being active.

They also discussed how they challenge those norms. The girls, for example, took photos engaging in non-traditional physical activities like aerial circus silks and climbing trees in skirts. They also stressed the importance of support from friends and family to feel safe in challenging norms. There was also a surprising finding: the emphasis they placed on being outside in nature.

Although nature and the environment were not part of the intended research purpose, being outside emerged as important. Many of the girls and young women shared photos of natural elements, like flowers, trees and water.



A photo of a tree submitted by a research participant. Author provided

They also took photos of themselves, their friends and families engaging in physical activity outside. This most often included general active outdoor play, but also, more specifically, activities like hiking and camping.

We learned that nature provided important context for these girls and [young women](#) to feel comfortable, safe and confident to navigate the complex gender norms around physical activity.

Safe spaces outdoors

A recent review shows that, due to urbanization and parental fears, [youth are less connected to nature than ever before](#) and are missing out on health benefits as a result.

This trend is duplicated in popular culture, with [books, songs and films depicting nature less and less over time](#).



A photo of a flower submitted by a research participant. Author provided

Similarly, a large-scale survey in the United States shows [youth spend more time with technology than nature](#) but also indicates they value their time with nature and need more opportunity for that connection.

With the United Nations' [recent warning](#) that we have only about a decade to alter climate change without devastating consequences, engagement with nature has never been more urgent. This can be done through encouraging [outdoor play](#), supporting active transportation and providing safe spaces for women and girls to participate.

Achieving gender equity

Interestingly, the [evidence indicates](#) that [women face barriers](#) to experiencing nature.

Gendered expectations, fear for their safety and feelings of objectification and vulnerability mean girls and women have to [negotiate these feelings in order to participate in outdoor recreation](#).



A photo of a girl climbing a tree submitted by a research participant. Author provided

Achieving [gender equity](#) is a key challenge for the 21st century, reinforced by the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#), which

also highlight the importance of nature, environments, sustainability and health.

The benefits of physical activity to mental and physical health are extensive but are not being realized by half the population. Studies are starting to explore [gender and the outdoors](#), while the [importance of nature to women is gaining momentum](#).

But there's more to do to determine how this finding can support gender equity. The importance of nature for health promotion is [an emergent trend in research](#), and the focus of the upcoming [International Union for Health Promotion and Education Conference](#).

Can nature be the key to promote physical activity among girls and [women](#)? More research is needed to know for sure, but it certainly shows promise.

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