

Science backs nature as key to children's health

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The presence of greenspaces near homes and schools is strongly associated with improved physical activity and mental health outcomes in kids, according to a massive review of data from nearly 300 studies.

Published online Sept. 29 in the journal *Pediatrics*, the review conducted by Washington State University and University of Washington scientists highlights the important role that exposure to nature plays in [children's health](#). Importantly, some of the data examined the effects for kids from historically marginalized communities and showed that the benefits of nature exposure may be even more pronounced for them.

"By looking at the full scope of existing quantitative evidence, we were able to see the importance of ready access to nature for both physical and [mental health outcomes](#) in childhood," said Amber Fyfe-Johnson, the study's lead author and an assistant professor with WSU's Institute for Research and Education to Advance Community Health (IREACH) and the Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine. "Access to nature—and the benefits that come with it—are a necessity, not a nicety. Unfortunately, not all kids are able to have regular nature contact. This is due partly to urbanization, increased [screen time](#) and more sedentary indoor lifestyles."

Lack of nature exposure disproportionately impacts historically marginalized communities that typically have fewer nearby residential parks and access to outdoor spaces, Fyfe-Johnson added. Families with limited resources and transportation options also face barriers to accessing parks and natural areas outside the city.

Although these findings may seem self-evident to some, and the American Academy of Pediatrics routinely recommends outdoor play time, convincing data on the [health benefits](#) associated with nature exposure have been lacking, due partly to inconsistencies in study methodologies and definitions of outdoor time. The authors point out that not all time spent outside is equal—a parking lot is not a park, and an urban playground without [natural](#) elements is not a garden. And without strong evidence to support the benefits to kids of spending time outside, in nature, there has been little political will to enact or enforce

policies that ensure equitable nature contact, said Fyfe-Johnson.

The researchers position their findings in the context of the nation's urgent public [health](#) crises around physical inactivity and poor mental health, in addition to fundamental sociodemographic inequities in access to nature. These disparities and public health emergencies have only become further magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, noted Dr. Pooja Tandon, the study's senior author.

"Making this information available to pediatric health care providers and [policy makers](#) provides support for practices and policies promoting environmental justice and equitable nature contact for kids in places where they live, play and learn," said Tandon, an associate professor at Seattle Children's Research Institute.

Fyfe-Johnson points to prior evidence suggesting that contact with nature and greenspace may offer even greater health benefits to disadvantaged populations by counteracting some of the toxic effects of poverty.

"We sincerely hope our work will help lead to improved access to nature and health outcomes for kids, in addition to reducing health disparities in childhood," she said.

More information: Amber L. Fyfe-Johnson et al, Nature and Children's Health: A Systematic Review, *Pediatrics* (2021). [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2020-049155](#)

Provided by Washington State University

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