

Children who spend more time in natural environments have significantly better mental health

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significantly better mental health, according to new research led by the University of Glasgow.

The innovative new study, which used GPS and accelerometer tracking, found that the benefits of spending time in nature were strongest for [children](#) from lower-income households.

The [study](#), which is published in the journal *Environment International*, found that children who spent just 60 minutes daily in nature had a 50% lower risk of mental health issues. Notably, the benefits were greatest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in terms of improved behavior and social skills.

In addition, the study found that using [natural environments](#) for light activities, such as walking, was equally as beneficial as using these spaces for more vigorous activities, such as running.

As a result of the findings, the researchers call for [collaborative efforts](#) between policymakers, local planners, community organizations, and [health professionals](#) to ensure [good access](#) to safe, high-quality natural spaces in disadvantaged areas. They also stress the importance of raising awareness about the [health benefits](#) of being in nature.

Amid rising concerns about children's mental health, and increasing urbanization, understanding how nature affects young people's well-being has never been more important. However, previous studies investigating nature-health relationships in children have shown mixed results. This is because studies often measure "nature exposure" as the amount of nature available near the home or based on parents' estimates, which do not accurately measure children's direct use of nature.

To address these issues researchers for this study—with the full consent of both participating children and their parents—used advanced GPS

and accelerometer technology to measure children's actual time in nature over one week. They also determined if children were using nature for vigorous activities, like playing sports, or for more sedate and sedentary activities, like walking or sitting. Children's mental health was then assessed via questionnaire and associated with their time in nature.

Dr. Fiona Caryl, lead researcher from the University of Glasgow, said, "Our findings suggest that encouraging children to spend more time in nature could be a simple yet effective way to support their mental health. Crucially, disadvantaged children appear to benefit more from time in nature than their advantaged peers."

Professor Rich Mitchell, senior author, said, "This provides compelling evidence of nature's role in reducing gaps in [mental health](#) between higher and lower income children. It suggests that natural environments might be 'equigenic,' that is, they can reduce inequalities by disproportionately benefiting those from less affluent backgrounds."

Co-author Dr. Paul McCrorie adds, "Natural environments may buffer less advantaged children against increased psychosocial and environmental stressors. They also increase opportunities for improving social connection through activities like team sports."

More information: Fiona Caryl et al, Use of natural environments is associated with reduced inequalities in child mental wellbeing: A cross-sectional analysis using global positioning system (GPS) data, *Environment International* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.envint.2024.108847](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2024.108847)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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