

Executive Summary

Nature provides children the perfect playground. When children are allowed to spend time in nature, they have an opportunity to explore, discover, create, imagine and wonder. Children's inability to spend time in nature can cause both physical and emotional health issues.

According to the Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation (2010), children today are spending an average of 7.5 hours per day in front of electronics. Myopia, nearsightedness, is caused by prolonged time spent in front of electronic devices. Electronic entertainment is a prime culprit in preventing our children from experiencing nature.

Children are also burdened with hours of homework and commitments to multiple extra curricular activities. With more responsibilities placed on children, spending time in nature becomes more difficult.

Furthermore, many children with working parents do not have opportunities to spend time in nature. According to Afterschool Alliance (2009), 15.1 million children nationwide are unattended afterschool. Children who are especially challenged to get outdoors are those living in low-income neighborhoods, where there may be limited access to safe green spaces.

Effects caused by time away from nature include childhood obesity and vitamin D deficiency. Obesity is a primary concern of children who lack time in nature. Obese children are more likely to have pre-diabetes and are also at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem (Daniels SR, Arnett DK, Eckel RH, et al., 2005).

Recommendations include:

- Accessible parks and green areas in neighborhoods.
- Teach environmental literacy, environmental awareness and understanding, as part of school curriculum.
- Green areas and nature related play structures at schools.
- Longer/more frequent recess time at school.
- Campaign to educate parents of the health effects of a child's absence of time spent in nature.
- Mandated posting of negative health effects from prolonged use of electronic devices.
- Educational outreach of benefits that time in nature provides for children diagnosed with ADD, ADHD and depression.

Information can be spread to parents, educators, doctors and policy makers about the benefits to our children that nature provides. Parents are at the forefront of this change that must first take place in our homes. Unstructured time in nature must also be part of school and health policy in our nation.