

CHILDREN IN NATURE

IMPROVING HEALTH BY RECONNECTING YOUTH
WITH THE OUTDOORS

NRPA POLICY POSITION

- Authorize legislation that improves our children's health, supports economic growth, and strengthens the future of conservation by providing incentives to states and local entities to reconnect youth and families with nature and foster environmental stewards.



BACKGROUND

Children today spend less time outdoors than any other generation, devoting only four to seven minutes to unstructured outdoor play per day while spending an average of seven and a half hours in front of electronic media. As a result, child obesity has reached unprecedented levels and continues to rise. Children are carrying this sedentary lifestyle and a disconnection with nature into adulthood which creates a troubling national trend for the future of conservation, our economy, and the health and wellness of our communities.

It also negatively impacts our military readiness as nearly 1 in 4 military applicants is rejected for being overweight or obese. It is imperative that we implement innovative strategies to reconnect our children and adults with the natural world, connect communities with green space, provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and play, and educate parents and caregivers about the important role the natural world plays in the life and development of us all. One such strategy is to provide incentives to states and local communities to develop programs that reconnect children and adults to nature.

Legislative efforts, such as the previously introduced *Healthy Kids Outdoors Act*, seek to improve our children's health, support economic growth and strengthen the future of conservation in America by providing states with incentives to develop innovative strategies to reconnect our youth and families with the natural world. The bill, which is expected to be reintroduced later this year, also directs the President to develop a similar federal strategy by bringing together federal agencies and national partners to create a national action plan; and supports research documenting the health, conservation, and other benefits of active time spent outdoors in the natural world.

WHY CONGRESS SHOULD ACT

The fundamental nature of American childhood has changed in a single generation. Today, childhood is spent mostly indoors, watching television, playing video games and working the Internet. The shift to an indoor childhood has accelerated in the past decade, with huge declines in spontaneous outdoor activities such as bike riding, swimming and hiking. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in a typical week, only 6% of children ages 9-13 play on their own.

The change can be seen in children's bodies. The percentage of American children aged 6-11 years who were obese increased from 7% in 1980 to nearly 18% in 2010. Similarly, the percentage of adolescents aged 12-19 years who were obese increased from 5% to 18% over the same period. Today, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese.¹

It can also be seen in their brains. Studies indicate that children who spend lots of time outdoors have longer attention spans than kids who watch lots of television and play video games.²

Time Spent Outdoors Improves Our Children's Health and Brings Balance to Their Lives

A lack of physical activity has led to serious health problems for too many of our children and put them on a fast track for chronic disease as youth and adults. Higher rates of obesity are the cause of many major health issues, decreasing the quality of life for all Americans and straining our nation's economy through related health care costs. America is now spending as much as \$147 BILLION annually in direct and indirect costs related to obesity.³ Another study concluded that the costs of hospitalizations related to childhood obesity rose from \$125.9 million in

² University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Human-Environment Research Laboratory

³ CDC

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)



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2001 to \$237.6 million in 2005.¹ Numerous studies, cited by the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, have shown a direct link between increases in physical activity and a reduction in the occurrence of chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, congestive heart failure, and stroke.

Time Spent Outdoors Supports Our Military Readiness

Not only are today's youth at risk of have a shorter life-span than their parents, our national security is also threatened as nearly one in four applicants to the military is rejected for being overweight or obese—it's the most common reason for medical disqualification.²

Time Spent Outdoors Supports Academic Achievement

Attention deficit disorders are impacting America's competitiveness and readiness to learn in the classroom. A study published by the American Journal of Public Health showed that children who spend quality time outdoors enjoying nature enjoyed significant reduction in the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Time outdoors spent in parks and open space, engages children in informal, experiential learning through play and shared experiences with peers, thereby, laying the foundation for effective formal education.

Connecting Children to Nature Ensures a Conservation Legacy

Those who do not spend time in nature are less likely to protect it, leaving the future of conservation, our nation's immense natural resources and America's hunting and angling legacy at risk. By engaging with nature, individuals gain an understanding about the impact that their actions can have on our natural environment.

¹ The Journal Health Affairs, 2009

² Unfit for Service: Implications of Rising Obesity for US Military Recruitment (Cornell Univ. 2010)

