

NEWS + ISSUES

Study: Kids Who Spend Time in Nature Become Happier Adults

BY JUSTIN HOUSMAN | FEBRUARY 27, 2019

At this point it seems the evidence is overwhelming—new studies seem to arrive on our desks each week that suggest simply spending time in green spaces can improve our health, both mentally and **physically**. As avid outdoors people, we

instinctively know that, but it's always nice to have science confirm our suspicions. And recently, researchers from Aarhus University in Denmark **published yet another study** about the outside/good health connection that may provide the most conclusive evidence yet. Getting outside, walking around, hearing the rustle of trees, feeling the wind on our face, the rain on our backs, the sun on our skin—the more we do that as kids, the happier we are as adults, their study suggests. And this was one heck of a study.

From 1985 until 2013, the researchers combed data from *one million* Danish residents. They looked at everything from income to educational level, history of familial mental illness, as well as how much green space surrounded where the residents had grown up. Because they had so much data to work with, the researchers were able to try and control for socioeconomic factors—kids who grow up wealthier probably have more access to green space, for example. Yet even factoring those discrepancies in, researchers found that being raised surrounded by nature as a child meant a 55 percent lower incidence of developing mental health issues as adults. Even better, it seemed that the more time children spent in nature, the better as far as mental health outcomes were concerned.

If we were talking about a new medicine that had this kind of effect the buzz would be huge—these results suggest that being able to go for a walk in the park as a kid is just as impactful.

The researchers were able to use satellite data to examine how much green space surrounded the residences of the subjects in the study. It was as simple as noting that kids who grew up in areas surrounded by more visible vegetation meant better

mental health outcomes as adults. Wilderness, public parks, even urban green spaces, it didn't seem to matter. The ramifications could be massive for future city and regional planning.

“There is increasing evidence that the natural environment plays a larger role for mental health than previously thought,” **said** Kristine Engemann, who led the study. “Green space seemed to have an association that was similar in strength to other known influences on mental health, like history of mental health disorders in the family, or socioeconomic status.”

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What the study can't show, however, is why this should be the case. Is it simple proximity to trees and vegetation? Or is it likely that kids who had access to more natural environments were more likely to be outside, getting exercise, perhaps doing so in groups and forming strong social bonds that they carried with themselves to adulthood? Maybe spending time in nature taught self-reliance, resilience, patience.

Or could it be that something in nature speaks to us in a way that won't show up on a scientific study? Doctors are prescribing nature walks for patients to help with chronic physical ailments. **Mountain biking groups** are healing mental illness sufferers. Surfing is a very real salve for veterans with severe PTSD and physical

ailments. It probably shouldn't be so surprising that growing up in a natural environment would also have powerful health benefits.

Perhaps there's simply a real physiological connection to being more in tune with the natural world. It's certainly something we feel when camping, when in the middle of the sea, when scaling a mountain peak, or even when lounging next to a lake.

"If we were talking about a new medicine that had this kind of effect the buzz would be huge," **said** Kelly Lambert, a neuroscientist at the University of Richmond. "But these results suggest that being able to go for a walk in the park as a kid is just as impactful."

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Photo by [Amy Treasure](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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10 Comments

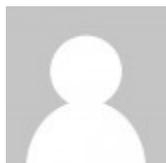


Dave @ Accidental FIRE on February 27, 2019 at 10:55 am

Yeah these studies are kinda like a “duh” factor at this point. The evidence is overwhelming. The Japanese have done tons of studies in this area and are actively adding more green space as a result.

The book “Last Child in the Woods” should be read by all.

REPLY



Mark Sevenoff on February 27, 2019 at 3:49 pm

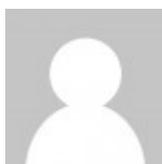
Another great read with similarities is The Nature Fix by Florence Williams. Just like you said – The evidence is overwhelming!

REPLY

**Dan O** on February 27, 2019 at 12:42 pm

I Second Last Child in the Woods. Thank God I was raised by outdoor people. I've always known where to go for solace and to get my head straight.

REPLY

**Rick** on February 27, 2019 at 5:54 pm

I'm always struck by how quickly kids find ways to enjoy themselves outside, without needing any input from adults. My oldest is 3. Even though he's never seen me do it, he was endlessly entertained throwing leaves into a creek and watching them float away.

REPLY

**Scott Fitzgerald** on February 28, 2019 at 12:30 pm

Yes, this is a reminder of what many of us already know and believe. But now what? It's time to link this research to what modern parents deeply desire – setting their kids up for “success” in life and spending quality (non-digital) time together. Success is not necessarily defined as ‘happiness’ yet. Parents often define success by getting into the best college as a marker of future success and well being. The road to this ‘success’ is paved with over-programming, pressure to succeed with

outdated academic standardized tests, and an almost complete elimination of 'down time'. And 'time together' is seen as standing on the sidelines watching your child perform. Outdoor adventure, and the subsequent happiness it delivers, ought to be re-positioned as a path toward a new definition of success. This is no light lift... but it's a worthy effort. Modern parenting is hard.. all of us reading this article have the very best way to make it easier – outdoor family adventure. Of course... I'm partial to it being on a bike 😊

REPLY



Adrian on February 28, 2019 at 2:46 pm

Is that really the best picture you could find for an article about children in nature – a girl with so much make up on?

REPLY



Mark on February 28, 2019 at 7:46 pm

Not sure if applauding science is how I feel after reading this. It's more depressing that the smartest modern people are creating insights for a culture that has deeply lost its core feature of humanity, which is that we are nature.

REPLY

Wendy J on March 1, 2019 at 3:10 am



Shinrin Yoku

Basking in the Forest.

A walk in the state forest behind our farm is best for my mental health. Something if those of us who have found its benefits should share with others who need the benefits of nature. Thank you for this article.

REPLY



Antonio dos Santos on March 1, 2019 at 9:56 am

Tenho a floresta como meu quintal e não pode existir sensação melhor, o cheiro, o ar úmido, a temperatura, o vento é fantástico, e para complementar tenho cavalos.

Parabéns o estudo vem comprovar o que ja sabemos na pratica.

REPLY



Michael wauschek on March 4, 2019 at 3:00 am

The more green we have just outside of our doors does help it makes feel as the earth likes it too.

REPLY



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