The readers of the Sand Paper live and work in a wide variety of locations, doing many different jobs throughout the United States and beyond. Some are located in rural areas where they live and work closely connected with nature. Others live and work in suburban or large urban areas, where they have to be more purposeful in order to spend time in the outdoors. I am forever grateful to those who went before us, who knew the importance of protecting public lands for parks and trails, so we all have places to go to connect with green space and the beauty of nature no matter where we live or work.

Our bodies were not designed to stay indoors all day, to sit for hours, or to be staring at a screen. A plethora of recent research continues to support the conclusion that we need to spend time outside, moving our bodies, and viewing the splendor of nature for our wellbeing.

This quarter’s Sand Paper presents articles describing the physical and mental health benefits of spending time in nature. The first article speaks to the benefits for children in getting outdoors, playing, and exploring. The second article shares the current research on positive mental health benefits we all can find in communing with nature. Dear Sandy answers a parents question about the challenge of balancing quiet seeking neighbors and noisy children at play in a community.

If you have a love of nature, please consider sharing your experience and comfort in that world with those who are not naturally drawn to going outside or have little experience there. Many who have little experience hiking, camping, or have not had an opportunity to view something like the wonders of a waterfall, need to be introduced to these joys through someone who has. There is not only health benefits, but also relationship value in encouraging someone to join you in enjoying time outside.

In the workplace, co-workers consider walking a trail during the lunch hour or sharing a picnic in the park. On the weekend, consider taking someone you love to a natural environment different from your home base for a few hours or days to de-stress and make happy memories. Children learn a lifelong love of nature and playing outdoors through family traditions created around time together with all family generations in woods, forests, near lakes, or oceans.

In times of stress, grief, and sorrow or when I am simply trying to work something out in my mind, I have found that a walk in the grandeur of nature among towering trees, moving clouds, and the creatures of the woods, help me to put my life concerns in perspective. I find much healing in nature. Nature brings me solace.

I want to share this quote with you. It was written by a young German girl, Annelies Marie Frank, whom many know as Anne Frank. Anne lived most of her childhood in hiding in concealed rooms during the persecution of the Jewish population during World War II. She died in a concentration camp. Her father survived the holocaust and found her diary which was eventually published as “The Diary of a Young Girl.” Anne had very few opportunities to freely commune with nature yet she wrote this impassioned entry that continues to inspires us today:

“AS LONG AS THIS EXISTS,” I THOUGHT, “AND I MAY LIVE TO SEE IT, THIS SUNSHINE, THE CLOUDLESS SKIES, WHILE THIS LASTS, I CANNOT BE SAD.”

Wishing you the enjoyment of summer days in your favorite natural place on earth.
Kids in Nature

By: Erica Kanewischer, Ph.D., LMFT

“Be home when the street lights come on.” This was the instructions given to kids in earlier generations of my family. The emphasis was clear – go outside and play, entertain yourself, make friends, find things to do. But, you had better be home on time. This level of freedom in childhood and trust in a community is nearly unheard of today. And yet, kids need nature and space to play.

In the book ‘The Last Child in the Woods’, Richard Louv details how children’s time interacting with nature has changed in the last generation. Researchers have found that spending time in nature is connected to physical and mental health, as well as environmental preservation. As a former summer camp counselor, mental health professional and parent myself – I was not surprised by this. But how is it playing out in our greater communities?

To hear how getting kids into nature happens in practice, I spent an afternoon talking with Jerome Meeds, Director of the Dunrovin Christian Brothers Retreat Center on the Saint Croix River near Stillwater, Minnesota. It is located in the middle of the Saint Croix River National Scenic Waterway – a National Park. While Dunrovin offers many programs for youth and adults, I was curious to hear about the groups of youth that come and stay with them from inner city Chicago and Minneapolis. Groups of about 30 middle schoolers come with their teachers. They stay in cabins or a dormitory style building. Activities include canoeing, swimming, fishing, archery, basketball, soccer, hiking, team building activities, and lots and lots of games. And sitting on grass. And watching bugs, birds, trees and all the other entertainment that nature provides.

Jerome shared that, for many of these students, this is the first time they have gone swimming or boating in an actual body of water. It is the first time they’ve caught a fish. For many of these students the sounds of bugs at night is loud and foreign and the bright light of the moon and stars an anomaly. When the students take an afternoon trip to a nearby playground, these big middle schoolers play “like little kids” on the swings and jungle gyms.

Most of these youths live in areas where outside play is discouraged. Gun violence, gangs, drugs and simple lack of green space make being in nature dangerous or impossible. Some of the students also have responsibilities to help take care of the family. For them, sitting on grass is a novelty. Outside play is a treat. Jerome has seen Dunrovin open up a new world to these kids. Students have told him that they want to “live in a place like this” – they see it is possible, to change your geography and live outside the city.

It is true that in nature, youth relax. Well, at first they may be stressed about being less connected to electronics, beauty routines and home in general. But, when given time, they relax. The noise of the outside world falls away. Dividers between peer groups disappear. Exploration of self and the world is more possible.

At Dunrovin, Jerome has seen students open up. They open up to experiencing the care that the staff and teachers have for them. They also increase their confidence. Youth can gain confidence in natural environments through trying new things – such as swinging from a rope into a lake. These experiences build upon each other and can translate into new
confidence in their classrooms or at home. The students also complete team building activities such as climbing over a wall as a group. Once over, the group processes the experience and uses the wall as a metaphor. They answer the question “What are the walls in your life that you can find ways to climb over?” This level of experiential learning is powerful, grabs kids’ attention and is easily referenced once they head home.

We all need nature. Youth especially need these experiences in which it is safe to spread their wings, try new things, connect to our planet, and see what is possible.

**Mental Health Benefits of Spending Time in Nature**

By: Erica Kanewischer, Ph.D., LMFT

In our fast-paced world, often the first thing we leave by the way-side is leisure time. And leisure time is frequently tied to being outside, away from work, or out of the home. However, time in natural landscapes and green spaces can be wonderful medicine to reduce stress, anxiety and feelings of pressure and depression. This time can be taking walks in a park or near a lake. The positive effects of nature on our mental health are even connected to the amount of trees in our neighborhood. Even viewing films or photographs of natural scenes can have a psychologically restorative effect on our mental health.

For many people across the world, the landscape is becoming more urban. Over half of the global population lives in urban areas, and by 2050 this is expected to increase to 70% (Heilig, 2012). In addition to this decrease in contact with nature, increasingly more of our work, play, interaction and time in general is tied to a computer, tablet or phone screen.

Over the last 30 years researchers have noticed these trends and have been studying why nature is good for us. They have developed two social science theories that showcase why natural landscapes reduce stress and improve functions like memory and attention.

**ATTENTIONAL RESTORATION THEORY**

ART describes how urban environments are full of constant stimulation and it takes a lot of attention to focus in these environments. This creates cognitive fatigue. Natural environments capture our attention and create senses of pleasure at the same time. There is a reduced need for focused attention and thus we feel cognitive restoration. Natural environments can give the experience of being “away” and connected to the natural world. Nature helps us experience the world as bigger than ourselves and offer comfort and respite from stressors. Experiences in nature elicit psy-
MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF SPENDING TIME IN NATURE, CONTINUED...

Psychological restoration and reprieve to combat the high demands on executive attention that come with urban settings.

STRESS REDUCTION THEORY

SRT explains how natural environments reduce stress and autonomic arousal through the way they activate our parasympathetic nervous system. Due to human's innate connection with nature, we always had an interconnectedness necessary for survival. Walking through forests and natural landscapes reduces cortisol levels, the hormone produced in the adrenal gland and released in response to stress. Being in nature decreases anxiety, rumination, negative affect and increases positive affect. It is useful to know that spending time in nature can have such a powerful affect on the mental health issues that are most common.

How do you access the benefits of spending time in or with nature? Do you need to book a summer hiking trip on the nearest back woods trail and stock up on gear? No, lucky for all of us, the benefits of spending time in nature are accessible in many forms. Most importantly, decide what you enjoy and what can fit into your life. The important variable is that you find the environment restorative. Choose something during which you experience a sense of restfulness, awe, wonder, peace, or energy.

Walking in a park, sitting in the grass, marveling at the colors of a flower, wading in a lake, or even looking at photos of natural landscapes all qualify. Try fitting a 20-minute walk outside into your day or choosing a ‘sit spot’ where you can see the natural world around and spend 10 minutes there observing nature without any interruptions. Plan a family outing to a new park, or bring the natural world indoors with plants, a small fountain or even just opening the windows. All of these offer connections with the natural world that we are intimately tied to through our biology, as well as an opportunity to remember the greater world and processes that exist all the time – right outside our door.

Resources


DEAR SANDY,

I have three kids. Now that summer is here they love being outside. Usually they will play with the neighbor boys from the time they get home from school until it gets dark, with a dinner break in between.

My problem is that a few other neighbors have complained about my kids when they’re playing in the front yard, or riding their bikes up and down the street.

Do you have any idea on how to address their concerns? I don’t want my neighbors to dislike me or my kids, but at the same time I think they should be able to play outside in their own yard!

Signed,
What to Do?

DEAR WHAT TO DO,

Thank you for this letter and happy summer! It sounds like your kids are being kids. For them to be outside is a healthy thing and helps them use their imaginations, increases socialization skills, not to mention much needed exercise. This is normal and you should support this as much as you can, with appropriate boundaries and respect for those around you.

Living in a neighborhood community can be tricky business, but also one that is ripe with potential too. I have two questions for you:

• What is the quality of your relationships with your neighbors?
• Are your kids exhibiting any behaviors that might be deemed by others as disruptive? (Examples: Are they screaming loudly? Inadvertently damaging property or going into other people’s yards uninvited?)

Establishing mutually respected expectations can only arrive by having conversations with those around us, and this includes our neighbors too. You might have a neighbor that works the third shift, or an elderly couple that enjoys quiet time on their patio at dusk, etc. We just don’t know until we ask questions and do it in a respectful way.

As long as you feel safe (this is important!), my first recommendation would be to look for opportunities to deepen relationships with your neighbors. This might give you some clarity on ways you can help, and also makes you come across as someone that is concerned about their own concerns. My second suggestion would be to communicate with your kids about the importance of being mindful of others in the neighborhood. Simple things like not screaming or fighting, or staying in their own yard are sometimes behaviors that children are just not aware of during active play time.

National Night Out is August 7th this year, perhaps consider hosting a neighborhood cookout and use that as a chance to bring your little community together to learn more about our diverse interests and needs.

Hope this helps!

Sandy

Send your Dear Sandy Questions to info@sandcreekeap.com
Sand Creek is a women-owned small business specializing in providing exceptional workplace wellness services to support the human spirit at work. We embrace our core values of service, hope, trust, compassion, and wisdom in each interaction, thereby upholding our mission of providing helpful solutions to improve productivity and shining a light in the darkest of moments.

Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is designed to offer face-to-face counseling and consulting to those that voluntarily reach out to us. We are not simply a phone counseling service or online tool type EAP. Thousands of professional counselors form a worldwide Sand Creek network available to deliver personal care and support to you in your community. Our services are administered nationally, but delivered locally.

Sand Creek supports the relationship between individual health and overall organizational health. Our Organization Assistance Program (OAP) service extends the reach into the organization and provides work teams with a systemic approach to improve the health and well-being of an organization.