

How can a family function better? Get outside together

June 20 2016

Getting out in nature, even for just a 20-minute walk, can go a long way toward restoring your attention. But does it have the same effect when you make it a family activity?

Family studies researchers at the University of Illinois have looked at the benefits of spending time in nature as a [family](#), and theorize that families who regularly get outside together tend to function better.

"When your [attention](#) is restored, you're able to pick up on social cues more easily, you feel less irritable, and you have more self-control. All of these are variables that can help you get along better with others," explains Dina Izenstark, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I, and lead author of a recent study published in the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.

Although research has already shown that exposure to [natural environments](#) can improve attention, Izenstark says the research is limited in that it is primarily focused on individuals and very short-term nature exposures.

"Our research adds to that by asking, 'what happens if you're in nature and not alone, but you're with a family member?' We're asking because we know that time spent in nature is often with one's family, especially for children," Izenstark says. "Our research takes into consideration the family unit, and if and how improved attention from being in nature transfers to family outcomes. We theorize that when your attention is

restored, it transfers to your family relationships and allows you to get along better with your [family members](#)."

Izenstark and co-author Aaron Ebata, an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I, reviewed existing studies on how families use natural environments under the frameworks of attention restoration theory and family routines and rituals perspective. Attention restoration theory, first developed by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, describes how interaction with natural environments can reduce mental fatigue and restore attentional functioning. Izenstark and Ebata's goal was to develop a new theoretical approach to studying the benefits of family-based nature activities.

Izenstark explains, "There is a growing body of literature that utilizes attention restoration theory to show how exposure to nature can restore attentional functioning. Kaplan and Kaplan propose that the natural environment is a unique context because it often has the four characteristics that encourage restored attention: being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility.

"Everyone only has a finite amount of attention. Especially in today's society where we are constantly looking at our cellphones or working on our computers and our email keeps popping up; we are constantly fatiguing our directed attention, but we're not always aware that we're doing it. It's so important that we incorporate moments into our everyday lives that we can look into nature and experience soft fascination to restore our attention. When you're at an amusement park or watching a sporting event, you're using your hard fascination. Your brain does not have the opportunity to relax or restore itself. Even though you enjoy the activity, it's still fatiguing you."

Ebata agrees, "There's this notion that watching TV is relaxing. All the research we know shows that in fact it may not be as restorative as other

things that might be even more beneficial."

The concept of feeling like one is getting away from the day-to-day also benefits the family. "Coming from experience, when you are a parent, especially with young active children and you're feeling a little stressed, there is something about going to a park and letting them run off and be able to take a breath and watching them have fun," Ebata says. "When you're home and still in charge, that doesn't feel like being away. But when you're out, there is something about [natural](#) places that almost releases parents from feeling like they are on duty in the same way they are at home. They are still on duty, maybe in a different way."

So in addition to nature's ability to restore attention, which in turn helps family members get along better, the researchers see how important it is for families to have nature-based routines or rituals that they participate in regularly. A common example for families might be walking the dog together almost every evening. This might be a simple activity, but one that brings a sense of belonging and identity to family members, the researchers say.

Ultimately, when the family can communicate "who we are" to each other, through their routines and rituals, it also helps with family functioning.

"Say a family goes to a park every Sunday. If you look at the long-term effects of family-based nature activities, you will see over time that the experience can foster a sense of identity and belonging. Because they go regularly or repeatedly, it's a family ritual, and in addition to the benefits of short-term exposure enjoyed during visits, they have a shared experience which helps make them who they are as a family, something that can be passed down through generations," Izenstark explains. "Even if you have a bad day during a visit, say you get rained on and everyone gets soaked, the total benefit of that ritual for the family becomes larger

than just individual, short term benefits. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts."

Ebata recognizes that some families just don't like to be outside. "There is research that shows that families that spend time in joint activities tend to have better relationship later on. But people tend to lump any kind of activity together, including watching TV," Ebata says. "We would argue that if you only watch TV together, that may not be as beneficial for the relationship as other kinds of more interactive activities. I have recommended watching TV together really as a stimulus for being able to talk to each other about different types of things. If that goes together, it can enhance relationships."

Izenstark agrees, "Many different types of leisure activities are associated with a variety of family functioning outcomes. We are saying we agree with that, but our study proposes that activities in nature have the potential to have greater positive outcomes than other leisure contexts. Leisure activities are one of the few contexts where families spend time together today. We want to encourage families, even if you only have 20 minutes to spend together and you want to maximize the benefit of that time for your family, go take a walk in nature together."

In a continuing study, Izenstark is testing their theory. For the experiment, moms and daughters are asked to take a 20-minute walk at the mall, as well as a 20-minute walk at the park. Izenstark is looking at whether attention restoration for the mom and daughter happened more after a walk at the park or a walk at the mall.

More information: Theorizing family-based nature activities and family functioning: The integration of attention restoration theory with a family routines and rituals perspective, *The Journal of Family Theory and Review*, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 1111/jftr.12138/epdf](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jftr.12138/epdf)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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