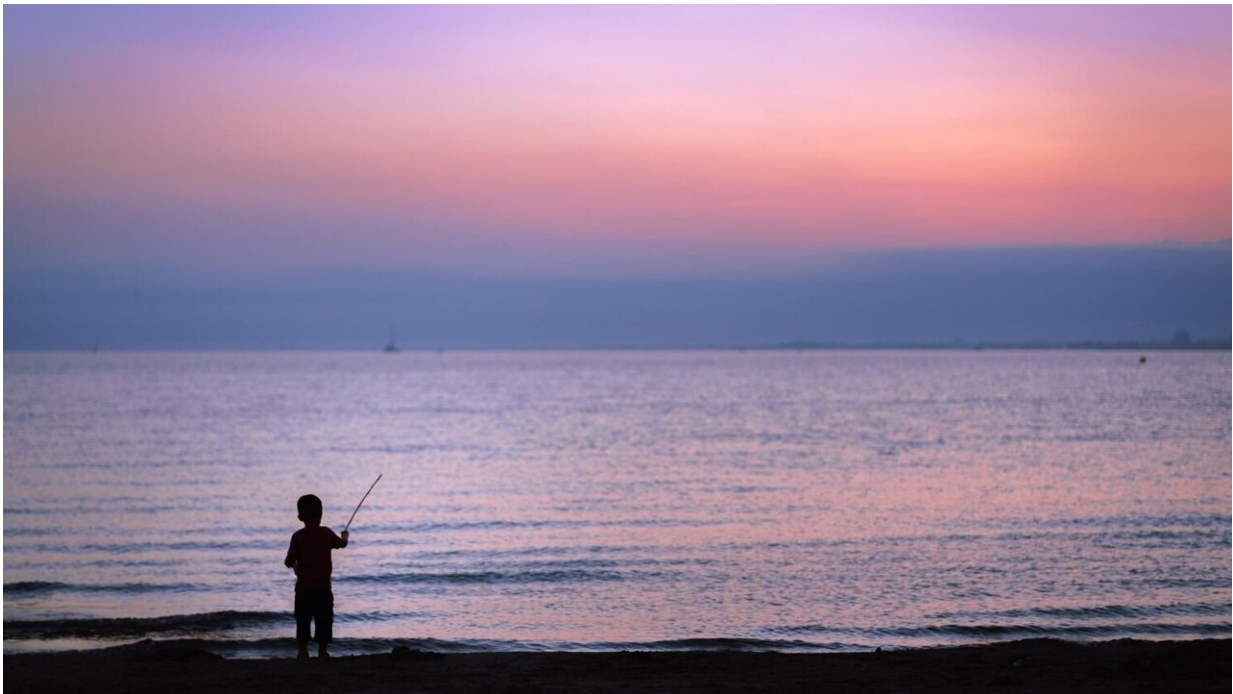


To bond with nature, kids need solitary activities outdoors

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A new study found solitary activities like fishing, hunting or exploring outside are key to building strong bonds between children and nature. Activities like these encourage children to both enjoy being outside and to feel comfortable there.

In addition to these independent activities, researchers led by an

investigator from North Carolina State University reported that they found social activities can help cement the bond between [children](#) and nature.

The findings could help children gain the mental and physical benefits linked with being outdoors at a time when researchers say younger generations of Americans may be less connected to nature than before.

"In order to create a strong bond with nature, you need to provide kids with an opportunity to be alone in nature, or to experience nature in a way that they can personally connect with it, but you need to reinforce that with social experiences either with peers or adults," said Kathryn Stevenson, corresponding author of the study and an assistant professor in North Carolina State University's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management.

For the study, researchers surveyed 1,285 children aged 9 through 12 in North Carolina. The survey focused on identifying the types of activities that help children build a strong connection to nature, which they defined as when children enjoy being outdoors and feel comfortable there.

The researchers asked children about their experiences with outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and playing sports, and their feelings about nature overall. The researchers then used children's survey responses to assess which activities were most likely to predict whether they had a strong connection to nature.

While they found that children who participated in solitary activities such as hunting or fishing built [strong connections](#) to nature, they also saw that social activities outdoors, such as playing sports or camping, helped to cement the strongest bonds that they saw in children.

"We saw that there were different combinations of specific activities that could build a strong connection to nature; but a key starting point was being outside, in a more solitary [activity](#)," Stevenson said.

The finding that solitary activities were important predictors of strong connections to the [natural world](#) wasn't surprising given findings from previous research, said Rachel Szczytko, the study's first author. She was previously an environmental education research assistant at NC State, and now works at the San Francisco-based Pisces Foundation.

"We have seen that when people who go into environmentally focused careers reflect on their lives, they describe having formational experiences outdoors during childhood, like walking on a favorite trail or exploring the creek by their home," she said. "We know that these kind of meaningful life experiences are motivating going forward. So we expected that when children are doing something more solitary, contemplative, when they're noticing what's around them, and have a heightened sense of awareness, they are more likely having these formative experiences and are developing more comfort and affinity for the outdoors."

The findings highlight a need to provide more solitary opportunities for kids when they are outside.

"When you think about recreation opportunities for kids, [social activities](#) are often covered; people are signing their kids up for sports, camp and scouts," Stevenson said. "Maybe we need more programming to allow children to be more contemplative in nature, or opportunities to establish a personal connection. That could be silent sits, or it could be activities where children are looking or observing on their own. It could mean sending kids to the outdoors to make observations on their own. It doesn't mean kids should be unsupervised, but adults could consider stepping back and letting kids explore on their own."

Researchers said children who are connected to nature are also likely to spend more time outside, which can lead to benefits for children's mental and physical health, attention span and relationships with adults. In addition, researchers said building connections with nature is also important for getting children involved in environmental conservation.

"There are all kinds of benefits from building connections to nature and spending time outside," Stevenson said. "One of the benefits we're highlighting is that children who have a strong connection to nature are more likely to want to take care of the environment in the future."

More information: Rachel Szczytko et al, How combinations of recreational activities predict connection to nature among youth, *The Journal of Environmental Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/00958964.2020.1787313](https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2020.1787313)

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