

National Parks Study: 'Every Kid Outdoors' program is increasing family hiking, but not for everyone

April 6 2022, by Trevor Jones



Delicate Arch in Arches National Park near Moab, Utah. Credit: Nate Edwards/BYU Photo

Spring Break—the unofficial kickoff to National Parks season—is here.

And thanks to the Every Kid Outdoors program, hundreds of families with fourth graders will soon be hiking Delicate Arch for free. In fact, the free public lands admission program is leading to more families than ever hitting up Arches, Zion, Glacier and Yosemite.

A new study from Brigham Young University researchers finds that the U.S.'s Every Kid Outdoors program—which gives families with fourth graders [free access](#) to national parks for one year—is leading to an increased frequency of hiking with children. Specifically, the proportion of families with fourth graders hiking on any given day jumped seven-fold from before the program's implementation to after.

"The increase is significant," said study co-author Camilla Hodge, a professor in the BYU Marriott School of Business. "Policies definitely have a role to play in affecting [family life](#). They have spillovers into family life and family behaviors."

However, that increase wasn't seen across the board demographically: The changes were most concentrated in high-income families and [white families](#). Data from Hispanic and African American families indicated a slight climb in hiking frequency on a given day, but not enough to be considered significant. Additionally, families in the lower half of the country's [income distribution](#) did not see significant increases.

Hodge and BYU School of Family Life Professor Jocelyn Wikle used a public resource called the American Time Use Survey as a basis for their findings. This involved analyzing a dataset of 5,119 family responses. They began by observing recreation patterns among families with fourth graders in the years 2013-August 2015 (just before the program's debut) and then compared these measured frequencies to September 2015-2016 data (the first year of the program).

Examining hiking frequency data among families both before and after

the policy allowed them to draw conclusions about its effectiveness.

Although the increase in hiking with children is potentially a positive development for strengthening [family relationships](#) and creating more active lifestyles, the data show there are still hurdles to cross. Given that the original goals of the program aimed to help equalize access to [public lands](#) across households of all incomes and ethnic and [racial groups](#), the research raises awareness that the policy may need some additional adjustments.

"We have a great opportunity for creative problem-solving to ensure equitable access and opportunities for outdoor experiences on public lands," Hodge said. "The country as a whole can consider how we can improve transportation to these lands, affordability of entry fees, and awareness of the policy aimed towards a broader audience."

The study has implications for both policymakers and families in general. Outdoor family recreation may help parents reduce children's screen time, and in some cases assist in parent-child connections. Being outdoors in natural spaces has also been linked to improvements in mental health.

"Being outside with your family, especially in nature, brings with it a shared sense of adventure and shared memories," Wikle said. "It's extremely valuable for [family](#) relationship-building and bonding."

Authors believe an awareness of the program's impact is a great first step. Moving forward, facilitators of Every Kid Outdoors—including parents, educators, and policymakers—should help drive awareness in their own areas of influence.

The research was published in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

More information: Jocelyn S. Wikle et al, Free Public Lands Admission for Children and Spillovers in Family Recreation, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-021-02225-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02225-6)

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