



chicago metro
aeyc
association for the education of
young children

Opening Minds to Connect Children with Nature



Children in the United States spend nearly six hours each day watching TV, playing video games or using a computer outside of schoolwork. In contrast, children today spend only 30 minutes per week in unstructured outdoor activities, such as hiking, gardening, picnicking or camping.



Overview

As technology evolves and becomes more and more prevalent, today's children are spending more time in front of the TV and computer and less time in the great outdoors. The impact of this change could be detrimental to their health—and the health of our planet.

Outdoor play in diverse, natural environments with varied landscapes invites children to act on their natural curiosity. With an endless range of things to explore, it provides a uniquely engaging environment for unstructured play.

Children who regularly engage in play without rules have an opportunity to exercise their curiosity, imagination and creativity. They learn how to entertain themselves with their own imaginations when they are bored, and develop valuable problem-solving skills when they are young, making them more flexible and better prepared to manage our unpredictable and complex world as adults.

The natural world provides a limitless playground for novel play, learning, health and education experiences. Children need to be exposed to fresh air and open spaces—whether that means strolling the local farmer's market, searching for four-leaf clovers in the park or chasing fireflies at dusk.

Why is this important?

- Nature-based curriculum is rich in science and math lessons, and by introducing these concepts in local child development programs, we are helping them meet and exceed the Illinois early learning standards.
- Higher quality programming in our child care centers means better outcomes for our children.
- Outdoor play increases fitness levels and improves critical body balance, agility and the development of healthy bones—decreasing risk of obesity and other health issues.
- Connecting children with their natural environment can enhance creativity, improve physical and mental well-being, and create lasting impressions that will impact the way they see the natural world as adults.
- Helping children develop positive emotional connections with nature will motivate them to take action on behalf of the environment as adults.

A growing body of research shows that unstructured time spent in nature is critical to the well-being of the environment as well as to children's physical, social and emotional and cognitive development.



Opening Minds: Fast Facts

- One out of every three children is now overweight or obese, a condition that places them at greater risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and cancer over the course of their lives.
- Preschool children who watched television for more than two hours a day were more likely to be overweight than children who watched television two hours or less daily.
- Worldwide, infants and children are experiencing a high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency; this lack of “the sunshine vitamin” is a risk factor for a number of chronic diseases and cancer.
- Daily exposure to natural settings has been associated with children’s ability to focus and enhance cognitive abilities, as natural settings provide open-ended materials like rocks, sticks, leaves and water, which require children to self-regulate and decide what to play, how to play and how long to play!
- Positive childhood experiences in the outdoors give children a chance to see firsthand the beauty of the natural landscape, which is a key factor in the development of an interest in conservation.

About the Campaign

Chicago Metro AEYC was selected by the World Forum Foundation to lead this region in fulfilling a promise to the Clinton Global Initiative to connect two million children to nature worldwide in the next two years by:

- **Building public awareness** through hands-on community outreach events, including exhibits at the Taste of Chicago and Illinois State Fair.
- **Launching the first Illinois Nature World Forum**, which will bring together environmental stewards and early care and education stakeholders in conjunction with Opening Minds: the Chicago Early Education Child Care and School-Age Conference in January.
- **Establishing an ongoing resource network** to serve as this region’s leading advocate for policies and practices that will benefit children, families, educators and countless others.



“The decline in children’s experience of nature will not change until a fundamental shift occurs in the attitudes and practices of developers, designers, educators, political leaders, and ordinary citizens. The enormous challenge facing us is how to minimize and mitigate the adverse environmental impacts of the modern built environment and how to provide more positive opportunities for contact with nature among children and adults as an integral part of everyday life.”

– Dr. Stephen R. Kellert, *Building for Life*

Making the Connection: *We need your support*

“Children are born with a sense of wonder and an affinity for nature. Properly cultivated, these values can mature into ecological literacy, and eventually into sustainable patterns of living.”

– Zenobia Barlow



By connecting children with nature, we are opening the door to a world of creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and pure wonder.

We rely on private funding to bring nature-related activities to our communities, including:

- **Expanding our Community Garden Project** to provide natural gathering places where teachers, children, families and community experience hands-on lessons in math and science as they learn the skills to grow and maintain organic gardens in urban settings which prevent obesity and provide an opportunity for children to be outside and physically active.
- **Building public awareness about this campaign by providing hands-on exhibits at community outreach events**, where children, families and teachers experience authentic and—for some—their first connection to nature. The impact of hands-on exhibit activities such as helping children make organic sock gardens so they can grow their own plants at home lasts long after the event is over.
- **Hosting healthy eating demonstrations and providing cooking tips to parents** to help promote and maintain healthy lifestyles and provide healthy alternatives to the low nutrition foods found in some grocery store aisles.
- **Bringing speakers from around the world to share their expertise** at our conferences and events to spread knowledge and advise us on how to be the best possible resource to further connect children with nature.

Join us in this effort to build public awareness and advocate for policies and practices that will raise a generation of children committed to protecting Planet Earth.

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Click here to make an online donation to support this campaign today!



Sources

"Children and Nature 2009: A Report on the Movement to Reconnect Children to the Natural World," Children & Nature Network, September 2009.

"Leave No Child Inside," 2009 Strategic Framework, Chicago Wilderness.

"Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity within a Generation," White House Task Force on Obesity Report to the President, May 2010.



"The movement to reconnect children and nature stands on a belief that healthy children are the heart and foundation for healthy communities."

*— Cheryl Charles, President,
Children & Nature Network*



About Chicago Metro AEYC

The Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children is the local affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the largest and most influential advocate in early care and education in the United States, with 80,000 members worldwide. Chicago Metro AEYC is the premiere professional development resource in the Midwest dedicated to pioneering and promoting new pathways to quality care and education for young children and their families in a broad array of settings.

www.chicagometroaeyc.org