

Children and the Environment

If you want your children to grow up to actively care about the environment, give them plenty of time to play in the "wild" before they're 11 years old, suggests a new Cornell University study.

"Although domesticated nature activities -- caring for plants and gardens -- also have a positive relationship to adult environment attitudes, their effects aren't as strong as participating in such wild nature activities as camping, playing in the woods, hiking, walking, fishing and hunting," said environmental psychologist Nancy Wells, assistant professor of design and environmental analysis in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell.

Wells and Kristi Lekies, a research associate in human development at Cornell, analyzed data from a U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service survey conducted in 1998 that explored childhood nature experiences and adult environmentalism. The Cornell researchers used a sample of more than 2,000 adults, ages 18 to 90, who were living in urban areas throughout the country and answered telephone questions about their early childhood nature experiences and their current adult attitudes and behaviors relating to the environment.

The findings will be published in the next issue of *Children, Youth and Environment* (Vol. 16:1).

"Our study indicates that participating in wild nature activities before age 11 is a particularly potent pathway toward shaping both environmental attitudes and behaviors in adulthood," said Wells, whose previous studies have found that nature around a home can help protect children against life stress and boost children's cognitive functioning.

A new Cornell study by environmental psychologist Nancy Wells and research associate Kristi Lekies shows that children with plenty of opportunity to fish, camp or play in nature before age 11 are more likely to grow up to be environmentalists than other children.

"When children become truly engaged with the natural world at a young age, the experience is likely to stay with them in a powerful way -- shaping their subsequent environmental path," she added.

Interestingly, participating in scouts or other forms of environmental education programs had no effect on adult attitudes toward the environment.

"Participating in nature-related activities that are mandatory evidently do not have the same effects as free play in nature, which don't have demands or distractions posed by others and may be particularly critical in influencing long-term environmentalism," Wells said.

Unlike previous studies that have looked at the effect of childhood experiences of adult environmentalists, this study looked at a broad representative sample of urban adults. By examining individuals' pathways to environmentalism, the study also took a "life course" perspective, that is, a view that looks at individual lives as sets of interwoven pathways or trajectories that together tell a story.

The study was supported by the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center and College of Human Ecology, both at Cornell.

Source: Cornell Chronicle