

The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development: A Discussion Paper

Suchitra Sugar (2021)

New York: UNICEF, 44 pages

Available as a free download at <https://www.unicef.org/documents/necessity-urban-green-space-childrens-optimal-development>

A new discussion paper from UNICEF, *The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development*, signals UNICEF's attention to a large and rapidly growing body of research on the importance of access to safe green spaces for people's health and happiness. The paper calls on national, state and local governments and organizations of civil society to review how they are implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in order to include promoting access to nature for all children, simultaneously achieving multiple economic, health and environmental benefits. In addition to reducing costs for public health, green infrastructure in cities reduces urban heat, sequesters carbon, improves air quality, and provides flood protection and a refuge for biodiversity. The paper covers its topics concisely, in an attractive format that includes vivid images of children around the world enjoying green spaces of different kinds.

In 1989, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the number of studies that demonstrated that people need greenery and green spaces near them for their health and wellbeing could be counted on one hand, and none of these pioneering studies involved children. In the 1990s, a cluster of new studies appeared. Since 2000, research on the benefits of including nature in the places where people live, work and play has become a robust field of study, with its own textbook (van den Bosch & Bird, 2018), conferences that convene people from across the globe, and many reviews of this burgeoning research, including studies involving newborns, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. *The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development* assembles a compelling case that it is time to integrate the implications of this research into urban policies and programs. With this paper, UNICEF takes a step in this direction; at the same time, it provides a substantial resource that can be used by any organization that works to increase young people's wellbeing or to increase green land surface in cities.

The author, Suchitra Sugar, presents findings related to children, nature and health through concise research summaries, a table, and extensive citations. She begins with benefits for newborns, who are more likely to be born with a healthy weight when their mothers have greenery around their homes and nearby green spaces that they can visit. She proceeds through early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence, summarizing benefits for physical, mental and social development, as well as the development of concern and care for nature. When children have nature nearby, physical benefits include more physical activity and better balance and motor coordination. Greenery around schools and homes is associated with better cognitive development in terms of improved concentration, attention, working

memory, and academic performance. Time in nature reduces hyperactivity, and access to nearby nature is associated with less stress, fewer social and behavioral problems, and lower rates of depression and other psychiatric disorders.

Because children in high-income families are more likely to have greenery around their homes and well-maintained parks nearby, Sugar only cites correlational studies that were conducted in low-income neighborhoods or that controlled for family income. She also draws on experimental, quasi-experimental and observational studies. She observes that most research has been carried out in Western countries but introduces a number of studies from East Asia and the Global South. She points out that some studies measure physiological changes that occur while in nature, including reduced levels of stress hormones and blood pressure; these are involuntary biological reactions that are likely to be consistent in children everywhere.

After this review, Sugar highlights the implications of these findings for local communities, institutions like schools and child-care centers, municipal governments, national governments, and organizations like UNICEF that respond to humanitarian crises. To ground her recommendations in the realities of difficult circumstances, she interviewed experts who are seeking to connect children to nature even under the conditions of slums, refugee settlements, or life on the street. She shares stories that suggest that access to nature can be an important source of resilience for children in difficult circumstances.

Sugar itemizes barriers that limit children's safe access to nature, such as the health risks of pesticide use in parks and other green spaces—to which children are especially vulnerable, as well as risks of crime, bullying, air pollution, waste, and disease vectors, which are most likely to affect green spaces in low-income communities. She notes that even when safe green spaces exist, children are often barred from their use by entrance fees or rules that prohibit active play, or excluded because they represent a marginalized group. For example, one of the experts whom Sugar interviewed, Sudeshna Chatterjee, shares a story from her research with slum children in India, who begged her not to improve a vacant lot where they played. If the site were beautified, they explained, people with power would no longer allow slum children to use it. Sugar observes that children with disabilities and girls often face the highest barriers to access. She advocates joint ownership and stewardship of green spaces by local communities as a way to ensure safety and maintenance of the spaces, and non-discriminatory community monitoring to deter anyone who threatens children's safety or attempts to bar access.

Sugar defines "green spaces" to include nature at every scale: not just parks, playgrounds and agricultural land, but also home and community gardens, overgrown vacant lots, street trees, roadside verges, and green roofs. This point deserves repeating, because as Chatterjee's story shows, small pieces of nearby nature can be most accessible. In her research with children in slums of Indonesia and India, Lyndsey Deaton found that because children were often expected to stay close to home—and this was especially the case for girls—small pockets and edges

of nature were essential for their access. She warns against exporting Western definitions of access, such as a park within a 10 minutes' walk, when what matters in many children's lives are places to gather under street trees or in gardens or small green lots in their immediate neighborhood (Deaton, 2021). It also bears repeating—and Sugar herself makes this point repeatedly—that children should be included in evaluating, designing and maintaining green spaces that serve them.

The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development is a visually attractive tool that individuals and groups of all kinds can use in advocating for the inclusion of nature in children's lives. It can be used to encourage greening initiatives in schools and child-care centers, to introduce nature into humanitarian responses like refugee settlements, and to approach governments at every level. Given the global recognition of UNICEF's name, this document can add weight to any initiative to connect children with nature.

Review by Louise Chawla
Program in Environmental Design
University of Colorado Boulder

References

- Deaton, L. (2021). *No place to play? Studies of how adolescents use public space in dispossessed communities*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Database.
- van den Bosch, M. & Bird, W. (2018). *Oxford textbook of nature and public health: The role of nature in improving the health of a population*. Oxford University Press.