

# What we gain from being in nature with our children

## Caregivers also benefit from green spaces close to home

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**I am not a very playful mother. Playing with my two children never came easily to me. But I love to be outside, so whenever I had any spare time I took my children for a walk. We did not go very far when they were young, just to those patches of land that are available in every neighbourhood – the end of a street, a small yard, maybe a park.**

Thinking back to these experiences, they brought a great array of benefits to me and to my family. I would cheer my daughter up as she tried to climb a gully, or I would share my son's wonder upon turning over a rock and discovering three kinds of bugs. These experiences were not only a way to enhance our connectedness to each other through our enjoyment of nature, and to nature itself, but also a powerful strategy to reclaim my children's attachment and strengthen my role as their mentor, compass and nurturer. These nature walks became some kind of ritual for us, an opportunity to talk and to spend some energy by being active outdoors. When we came home, all daily tasks – from picking up toys to brushing teeth – went much more smoothly.

When we hear about the benefits of nature to our health and wellbeing, it's all too easy to think of huge mountains and vast wilderness – the kinds of places most of us would have to travel for hours to get to. But contact with nature can also be on a very small scale: plants inside the house or trees outside the apartment building. Even contact with this kind of nature can bring benefits.

**“These experiences were also a powerful strategy to strengthen my role as their mentor, compass and nurturer.”**

The benefits of nature for caregivers include reducing anxiety, improving sleep quality, boosting mood, and enhancing overall emotional wellbeing (Jimenez et al., 2021). Nature also offers opportunities for activities that maintain physical health (World Health Organization (WHO), 2016). Parents and caregivers who live in greener

neighbourhoods are less stressed, and presumably bring less stress home to their children (WHO, 2016). Parents and caregivers who experience nature together with their children improve their communication and build stronger bonds (Izenstark and Ebata, 2022).

Regarding the benefits for children, the American Academy of Pediatrics published in 2021 a review of evidence that found a positive relationship between contact with nature and children's physical and mental health (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021). The evidence supports what traditional cultures have been telling us for centuries: a nature-rich childhood is crucial for children's development. Playing and engaging with nature makes kids healthier, happier and smarter (Islam et al., 2020). Children brought up with nature are also more likely to develop pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Chawla, 2006).

Agencies as varied as the WHO, UNICEF and the International Union for Conservation of Nature stress the importance of local and national governments ensuring safe and accessible green space in communities (Sugar, 2021). This requires reducing the barriers to access to nature that affect some communities more than others.

### **Natural play spaces designed for families**

One initiative in Brazil that has been trying to address that challenge is the implementation of natural play spaces in small and unused areas of cities where there are few formal parks. These "pocket parks" can be a powerful strategy to spread access to nature through neighbourhoods that have been historically underserved.

However, they face resistance. Implementing natural play spaces is still not prevalent in Brazil; people are too attracted to traditional playgrounds and see nature as dirty or dangerous. Natural playgrounds are wrongly perceived as posing more safety, maintenance and resilience issues than wholly artificial environments that feature concrete and plastic play equipment. And the benefits of nature for caregivers are even less widely appreciated than the benefits for children.

Alana has been tackling this challenge through an advocacy and mobilisation strategy to promote natural play spaces. Since 2020 we have been working in partnership with the Van Leer Foundation's Urban95 project to establish a process that enables cities to design, implement and manage natural places on their own. We are currently working with seven cities across the country, and the response has been very positive. Parents and caregivers are involved in the process of design, planning and implementation and see these spaces as a strategy to enhance the family's access to open spaces and nature. Recent research conducted in one of the cities, Fortaleza, showed that more than 90% of parents and caregivers believe that natural play spaces increase time spent outside.

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### **Reviving a collective memory in nature**

Claudio Rodrigues, an architect and the head of urban planning for the municipality of Mogi das Cruzes in São Paulo, explains how taking a leadership role in the Urban95 initiative has changed his views:

*“Despite the expected obstacles, there is also a collective memory and enthusiasm about being in nature for community bonding and wellbeing. People used to have quintais and terreiros (backyards and terraces) and those were important spaces for socialisation and culture. During my work with the Urban95 initiative I learned that the cultural connection to nature is not just something ancient and distant. There is a current and large desire and opportunity to re-engage our current lives with nature. The natural play spaces public policy is a way to address the right we all have to find that.”*



Photo: Rinaldo Martinucci

↑ Jardim Helena Natural Play Space, São Paulo, Brazil.

Today my children are 15 and 10 years old, and we still go on family walks every day to relax and connect with ourselves and with nature. Most of the time, the children are the ones who take the initiative. After a walk outdoors at the end of a

long and tiring day, we come back home ready to make dinner and enjoy a meal together. The joy and healing that comes from being in nature – and that helps to meet the challenges of parenting – should be available to everyone on a daily basis.

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