



A Policy-Based Approach to Fostering a Connection with Nature for Ontario's Children

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Prepared by the Back to Nature Network, Ontario

Introduction

Passion does not arrive on videotape or on a CD; passion is personal. Passion is lifted from the earth itself by muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart.

Richard Louv, from *Last Child in the Woods*

Ontario's Back to Nature Network is a growing and diverse group of organizations uniting to build capacity to connect children and nature in ongoing and meaningful ways through awareness-raising, the creation of resources, and the development of policy. Through policy development, the Back to Nature Network aims to positively influence policies and programs at the provincial and local level that will inspire decision makers to broaden and enhance the opportunities Ontario's children have for learning and playing in nature.

Research strongly supports the link between the healthy child development and time spent in nature. A large and diverse body of evidence reinforces the conclusion that children who regularly spend time outdoors in natural settings have diminished risks of some chronic diseases, reduced stress levels, enhanced emotional well-being, increased ability to focus and learn, and improved fitness levels. At the same time, research shows that children are spending less and less time outdoors. The average Canadian child spends close to eight hours a day in screen-based time¹. Clearly, it is time to replace "screen time" with "green time."

In an effort to positively influence key policy areas of **health, education** and **planning**, the Back to Nature Network has published a series of policy papers. These documents present a number of policy options that are designed to improve access to learning and play in nature for Ontario's children. These options are largely targeted at provincial programs and services, but also have resonance for municipalities and communities.

The policy papers were created with input from stakeholders in education, the environment and recreation and two policy workshops.

In addition to the three policy papers, the Network, in partnership with the Government of Ontario, Ministry of Natural Resources, has produced an Ontario Children's Outdoor Charter. The Charter aims to get children outside to discover the wonders of nature. Spending time outdoors is essential to every child's development, health and well-being. It builds a connection to our rich natural and cultural heritage. Kids connected to nature grow up caring for the Earth and helping to conserve biodiversity.

If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it. Perhaps this is what Thoreau had in mind when he said, "the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings."

David Sobel, from *Beyond Ecophobia*

¹ Active Healthy Kids Canada 2012 Report Card

People, organizations, governments and communities that support the Charter recognize that time outdoors is important for children’s health and wellness. Supporters of the Charter can promote it in their communities and improve opportunities for children of all abilities and backgrounds to play and learn outdoors.

How you can use these resources

Policy Papers

The policy papers are intended to speak to decision makers in local and provincial government. They include information about the benefits of increasing access to nature for children for learning and for play. Each of the policy options presented can be excerpted and used by an organization for in its government relations strategies. The Network will use the policy papers as a platform for future discussions with provincial government. The Policy Papers can be downloaded at:

<http://www.back2nature.ca/policies>

Ontario Children’s Outdoor Charter

The Charter is designed to spark action at the local level. It can be used by individuals, families, schools, day cares, community groups, recreation providers and local government. Families can use the Charter as an inspiration for getting outdoors more for play and fun. Those providing programs for children may use the Charter to help create programs that focus on outdoor play and learning. Local government may use the Charter as the focal point for a community guide that showcases the many outdoor activities and programs available. The Charter can also be used as a foundational document for parks and recreation master planning.

Local government and organizations are encouraged to pass resolutions or proclamations supporting the Charter. To download the Charter and other resources, please visit:

<http://www.childrensoorcharter.ca/>