

Boosting health can be a walk in the park

Ontario physicians urged to prescribe dose of outdoors for mental, physical benefits

ANDREA GORDON
LIFE REPORTER

If a couple of Ontario nature experts have their way, doctor's orders at your next medical checkup might include taking a quiet stroll through the nearest grove of trees.

Your family physician might mention the benefits of watching a sunset or rambling through the local ravine listening to the birds.

The healing power of nature is the subject of a new medical accreditation designed for Ontario family doctors, aimed at putting the great outdoors on the agenda when it comes to boosting patients' health.

"People listen to physicians," says Bill Kilburn, program manager of Burlington-based Back to Nature Network, who developed the new hour-long webinar with Dr. Marg Sanborn, an emergency physician in the southwestern Ontario town of Chesley.

While doctors inherently know that going outside is good for you, "peer-reviewed research that speaks to them will give them the opportunity to be convinced."

The educational module reviews the mounting pile of studies that demonstrate the benefits of nature on everything from longevity and obesity to stress, myopia, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

"Physicians are not quick to uptake new ideas, they want to see the evidence," says Sanborn, a physician for more than 30 years who used to run a family practice.

Now that the evidence is there, doctors need to be armed with it, so that conversations with patients about breaks in green space become part of their tool kit.

The program will also be available to other members of family health-care teams including nurses, kinesiologists and occupational therapists.



COLE BURSTON FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Claire Mackinnon plays during outdoor class at Hewitt's Creek Public School. Doctors are promoting the benefits of outdoor education.

It is expected to be available this year as a CME, or continuing medical accreditation delivered through the Ontario College of Family Physicians.

One of the recognized psychological benefits of nature is attention restoration. Outdoor time has been shown to restore burnout that comes from sensory overload created by busy urban environments, the digital world, a day at work or in the classroom. The result is people feel rejuvenated, better able to concentrate and more productive.

Other compelling research has looked at how nature stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, re-

sulting in a calming effect similar to yoga or meditation.

Japanese researchers have led the way in measuring those benefits using physiological markers such as blood pressure, levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and chemicals related to our immune systems.

"Nature prescriptions," — also known as "green prescriptions" or "park prescriptions" — have caught on in parts of the U.S., where some health-care centres partner with local conservation authorities to encourage use of walking trails and provide discounts for patients.

Closer to home, the Ontario chapter of the Canadian Mental Health

Association has joined forces with provincial hiking organizations to pioneer "mood walks," a form of free walking support groups in nature organized by chapters throughout the country.

But while the notion of scribbling instructions on a special nature prescription pad catches people's attention, Sanborn doesn't see any signs that Ontario physicians are following the trend of actually writing it down. "Behaviour change is really difficult," she says. "In family practice you're lucky if 15 per cent of patients pay attention."

At the same time, the trend in family medicine is to promote self-care,

with health-care experts acting as collaborators rather than dictators. And the notion of introducing proactive steps such as a dose of nature fits well with that, she says.

You can find nature at the end of an urban cul-de-sac, a small backyard or an inner-city park. And it doesn't have to cost anything.

Doctors needn't worry about the "dose-response curve" for this remedy either, notes Kilburn. Science has shown positive effects on mental health in exposures as short as five minutes. Even looking at a green view out the window instead of a wall of concrete has shown measurable differences in well-being.

Q&A > ANDREA FABER TAYLOR

WHEN NATURE IS THE CLASSROOM

Study on impact of outdoor classrooms is first of its kind in Ontario

ANDREA GORDON
LIFE REPORTER

Every day in Simcoe County, 150 kindergarten students are exploring new territory, and in more ways than one.

They're doing it while marching through muddy forests during outdoor lessons across the region north of Toronto. They're also breaking new ground in research, as subjects of a two-year study. The study is the first of its kind in Ontario and will investigate the impact of regular learning time outdoors in nature.

More than two-thirds of the 85 elementary schools in the Simcoe County District School Board have outdoor classrooms, the result of a recent push to green school grounds. Anecdotally, adults report benefits. Kids seem more engaged, curious, self-confident.

But educators wanted hard evidence. How does being outside actually affect the children's ability to learn?

So they launched the study this year, in partnership with the Burlington-based Back to Nature Network and funded by \$89,000 from the TD Friends of the Environment Fund.

The project involves six classes in three schools. Half the classes spend 100 minutes or more outside every day and the others, acting as a control group, are outside much less. Next year, it doubles to six schools. Goals include monitoring each student's self-regulation — a skill that's key to learning — as well as teacher satisfaction and whether outdoor time at school impacts decisions to go outside at home.

The Star spoke with lead researcher Andrea Faber Taylor, a child environment and behaviour researcher at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Here's an edited and condensed version of the conversation.

What is self-regulation?

Being able to stay on task and inhibit impulses. It's the ability to manage your own energy, emotions, behaviours and attention in ways that are socially acceptable and that promote good relationships and learning.

How might being in green space affect it?

It's based on the theory of attention restoration, and the idea that we have



Research Andrea Faber Taylor is leading a study into the impact of such classrooms in Simcoe County kindergartens.

two types of attention. Directed attention requires effort. We use it to tune out distractions, stay focused on a task and direct our thoughts. But when it fatigues, we become impulsive and irritable and we make bad choices. We also have this other capacity called involuntary attention, which helps restore focus and allows room in our mind for reflective thinking. It doesn't require effort. Nature has a lot of characteristics that seem to draw on involuntary attention.

Like what?

Elements of soft fascination — running water, the breeze in the trees, fire, wildlife, waves, even indoors watching a fire in a fireplace — which are gently engaging and not fatiguing. And other characteristics like space, a feeling like there's more than meets the eye, that there's a little bit of mystery. There's a sense of being away from our everyday worries and activities.

How does that help self-regulation?

When direct attention fatigues, our capacity for self-regulation goes down. Stepping into a greener space means you can attend to what's around you. It gives you a mental break.

Why is this study important?

We need more evidence of how beneficial schoolyard green space can be because children spend a lot of time in school, including before and after. It's a critical setting for greening, even more important may be than the home yard. This is their opportunity to interact with nature.

Why do we need to document something that seems obvious?

There's the question of how much is enough. There's a tendency to think more is always better, but maybe it's not. While we intuitively know green space is good, it doesn't get priority when push comes to shove in terms of time and money. Research is mounting that green space is not just an accessory. It's actually a necessity,

an important component of healthy living. But policy-makers always look for quantitative evidence to make those decisions. If they can point to a study that says it's important then they'll make it a priority.

What about at home?

Parents would be more motivated if they could see evidence that being outdoors makes a measurable difference in children's healthy development. What I see as a parent is that we're all overscheduled, so even if you know nature is good for your kid, the reality is if it doesn't fit in the timetable it doesn't happen. We all have to be reminded that this is not just nostalgia. It's a real relationship, it's measurable and we need to work it into the schedule just like swim lessons. When you talk to other parents it's always "my kid is doing this and this and this." Nobody ever says, well my kids play in the backyard three days a week. But that's what we need.

How does your education in ornamental horticultural inform your research?

I think about not only whether a space is green, but also how children experience it. Is it comfortable? Does it afford the kinds of activities they need to engage in for healthy development such as running and climbing, pretend play, manipulating materials and constructive play such as digging and building? And does it provide opportunities for children to experience solitude and separation from their peers for a little while? That's really important for attention restoration, just that quiet experience of the space.

So in other words, letting kids be kids is key?

Yes. I love that (Maria Montessori) quote, "Play is the work of children."

What's your advice to parents about prioritizing outdoor time?

Just try it. No known side effects, right? It doesn't cost anything. Every child is unique in how they experience nature, so figure out what works. Maybe one child biking through a park is the way to do it and letting another child play in a sandbox or climb a tree is most beneficial. It has to be child-driven. It's not necessarily a one-size fits all.

Vitamin N offers prescription for 'nature-deficit disorder'

Nature advocate shares tips on how to reconnect parents and kids with green spaces

ANDREA GORDON
LIFE REPORTER

Richard Louv coined the phrase that captures the disconnect between modern kids and the outdoors. "Nature-deficit disorder" was how he described the phenomenon in his landmark book *Last Child in the Woods*.

A decade after naming the problem, the California-based author and outdoorsman is promoting another catchy term, this time for the cure — regular doses of nature. He calls it Vitamin N.

Research has exploded in the last few years showing that time spent in green space is good for brains, bodies and souls. It is believed to improve mental and physical health, cognitive skills, sensory development and learning.

As children spend more hours in the digital world blocking out their senses to focus on a screen, nature is more important than ever as an antidote, he argues in his new book *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life*.

"There's no precise prescription," he explained in an email interview. It doesn't have to be complicated.

While Louv grew up in an era when kids roamed free and the only screens were on televisions, Louv's not anti-tech. His book includes an array of ideas for bringing technology to the outdoors and vice versa.

His ultimate form of multi-tasking? Straddling both the digital world and nature to develop what he calls "a hybrid mind."

Here are his tips:

Put nature on the calendar: Family life is hectic these days. For many, the only way to actually make sure there's time to go for a hike, a picnic or even hang out in the backyard is to book it as you would a soccer game. Think of it as the family equivalent of a date night.

Be the guide on the side: When outdoors with kids, back off. Let them follow their own noses, whether it means collecting sticks or jumping in mud puddles. Encourage them to ask questions and figure out answers, even by looking them up later. Be curious observers with a sense of wonder alongside them.

Enliven the senses: Awaken them by focusing on one at a time. Have



Richard Louv's new book, *Vitamin N*, offers ideas for enjoying nature by using technology and vice versa.

kids travel on their bellies for a close-up view of the earth. Use a paper "sniffer cup" for smelling natural objects like pine needles or wildflowers. Go barefoot. Cup your ears to focus on "seeing" the environment through noises.

Seek positive places with negative ions: Natural settings with plant life and water — beaches, streams, waterfalls — tend to be rich in molecules called negative ions. You can't see or smell them, but when they're inhaled and reach the bloodstream, negative ions are known to boost serotonin levels, which, in turn, alleviates depression.

Bathe in the forest: Forest bathing or *shinrin-yoku*, as the movement is known in Japan, is based on evidence that a relaxed walk in lush woods has measurable calming and restorative benefits.

Discover the art of nature: Pressed leaves and flowers, sculptures made of sticks and rocks, daisy chains, painting with mud or the juices of wild berries and nuts, side-walk chalk drawings created by tracing the sun's shadow, percussion instruments from stones shells or logs. Let the imagination go wild.

Pick a "sit spot": Urge family members to find their own special place they visit frequently to find peace and to observe how it changes according to the light, season, temperature and bugs, birds or other creatures in the vicinity.

Teach tree climbing smarts: It's a mainstay of childhood that hones balance, strength, agility, coordination and sense of risk. But too often it's forbidden by over-anxious adults. Don't get onto branches with a circumference smaller than your wrist. Always have at least three points of contact with the tree — two hands and one foot or vice versa. And don't overreach.

High-tech can be high nature: Some days are for escaping technology. But you can also use it to engage kids. Design a photo scavenger hunt and send them to take pictures, use a Go-Pro to record an activity or a cellphone to record nature sounds, or to download a digital nature guide.

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