



what works
wellbeing



Family and outdoor recreation

Does spending time taking part in activities outdoors with family improve wellbeing?



the big idea

Existing evidence shows that doing activities outdoors can be good for our wellbeing. It can make us feel happier, and more satisfied with life, or less anxious and depressed. However, most of the evidence is about the individual wellbeing of adults, a small amount is about the wellbeing of children and very little is about adults and children together in families.

The review this briefing is based on examines whether taking part in physical activity outdoors, with family, affects our subjective wellbeing. By subjective wellbeing we mean the good and bad feelings arising from what we do and how we think.

We sifted through 135 studies and 15 were included



The studies came from the UK, Norway, Singapore, Ireland, Canada, Thailand, Australia

The review looked at studies published between 1998-2018, as well as unpublished reports produced by, or for, organisations about the wellbeing benefits of outdoor activity since 2013.

In addition, we carried out some detailed analysis of survey data to understand how spending time outdoors with different people, friends and family, affects our wellbeing.

In partnership with:



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Culture and Sport Evidence Programme
What Works Centre for Wellbeing
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A range of outdoor activities have the potential to improve subjective wellbeing for diverse families. The impacts of outdoor activities for families on wellbeing are:



The idea of self (self-identity, worth, value)



Social bonding



The abstraction/feelings (escapism, sensorial, relaxation)

Looking at published and unpublished studies, three studies that included numerical measures found no effect of outdoor, family-based physical activity on improving wellbeing. However, by looking at 13 qualitative studies that included people's personal experiences, we found that some types of outdoor family-based activity can enhance wellbeing.



evidence gap

The evidence is limited and the study methods have some weaknesses. However, the lack of evidence identified in this review does not necessarily mean that there are no wellbeing benefits from taking part in outdoor physical activity with family members. There is an opportunity to build a better evidence base for wellbeing and outdoor recreation for families through well-designed evaluation methods and stronger approaches to making sense of the data collected.



concepts explained

By 'family', we mean two or more people living in any type of partnership, relationship or family context. There were several different family relationships included in this review, for example: parent-child relationships, healthy couples without children, and couples in which one partner was caring for the other.

For outdoor activity, we included land-based activities (green space) and water-based (blue space). There were several types of outdoor activity included: exploring nature in national parks, hiking, gardening, beach or coastal visits, bushcraft or other woodland activity, multi-activity camps (with activities like horse riding, canoeing and fishing), cycling, pram walking, and family camping. Alongside physical activities we also included spectating or watching outdoor activities.

Can't find your project, programme or activity?

It is important to note that a lack of evidence about an intervention does not mean that it is not effective.

The finding that there is limited evidence for some intervention types suggests that more rigorous research needs to be done.



It is equally important to have evidence of what does *not* work.







what evidence did we find?



Our systematic review¹ of the evidence found that overall the evidence base was quite limited in terms of number of studies and quality, especially when looking at quantitative studies.



Key messages: the five minute read

- 


Taking part in outdoor recreation with families has no significant effect on children's quality of life.^{a, f}
- 





Taking part in outdoor recreation with families has no significant effect on self-esteem and other measures of psychological wellbeing.^{f, h, i}
- 




Taking part in outdoor recreation with families improves self-competence learning and identity through family connection to nature.^{b, f, g, j, m, o}
- 



Taking part in outdoor recreation with families improves wellbeing via escapism, relaxation and sensory experience.^{a, b, c, g, m, o}
- 


Taking part in outdoor recreation with families improves social bonding as a family.^{a, b, f, k, l, m}

There are three types of evidence

- 



strong
We can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.
- 


promising
We have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.
- 

initial
We have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

Qualitative or quantitative evidence?

Where you see the following symbols it indicates:

QUANTITATIVE



QUALITATIVE



Strong, promising and initial evidence refer to high, moderate and low quality evidence / confidence as per GRADE and CERQual guidance. For further information on these classifications, please see the Centre's [Methods Guide](#).

All evidence should be considered alongside questions of possible benefits and risks, affordability, acceptability, feasibility and wider impacts, including equity issues, in the user setting. Where the evidence is less strong, these other considerations become even more important.

¹ Mansfield, L., Kay, T., Meads, C., John, A., Daykin, N., Gigsby Duffy, L., Lane, J., Dolan, P., Testoni, S., Julier, G., Payne, A., Tomlinson, A. & Victor, C. (2018). A systematic review of outdoor recreation (in green space and blue space) for families to promote subjective wellbeing. [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#).



what evidence did we find? (cont.)

Analysis of survey data¹ shows that people's enjoyment of the outdoors is enhanced when they are spending time with family and friends, and in particular with partners.

The analysis is based on two Time Use Surveys, one from the UK and one from the US, which collect data on people's daily experiences. Both datasets contain information on what people do throughout the day, where, and with whom.

In the UK people were asked how much they enjoyed a specific activity and spending time outdoors was found to have a positive effect on their enjoyment. Analysis was also conducted to understand the effects of who they were with and it found that people enjoy spending time with both family and friends, more than spending time alone.

When analysing these factors in conjunction, the effect of spending time with family outdoors was simply the sum of the two individual effects. This was more than the combined effect of spending time with friends outdoors. This applied to all types of outdoor activities,² except socialising, where the positive effect was higher with friends. This means that on average, UK residents in the sample, reported enjoying their time outdoors with relatives more than with friends. Within the family, partners had the largest rise in enjoyment in comparison with children and parents.

In the US people were asked about their happiness, stress and meaning during an activity. The US data finds that being outdoors³ is enhanced when spending time with friends and family. In specific, people are happiest when outdoors with their partners. This is because there is an additional benefit over and above the two independent effects of spending time outdoors and spending time with partners.

This research identifies correlations, but not causation. More research is needed to help us to understand the causal links and the effects of different activities, different family members in more detail, for example siblings, grandparents and so on.

Based on a sample of UK residents:



More people reported enjoying time outdoors with families more than with friends.



Within the family, spending time with partners had the largest rise in enjoyment compared with children and parents.

¹ Dolan, P. & Testoni, S. (2018) Assessing the relationship between subjective wellbeing and spending time with family in the outdoors. [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#).

² Activities were categorised as 1) culture and entertainment; 2) eating; 3) socialising; 4) sport and physical activity; 5) walking and biking.

³ Defined as "Outdoors away from home".



How can we turn this evidence into action?

1

The evidence points to a positive link between participation in outdoor activities with family and friends and wellbeing.

There is a case for promoting outdoor recreation, especially as a family-orientated activity at a national level. But there are still a lot of unanswered questions given the limited amount of evidence and its low quality.

2

Build the evidence base for wellbeing in the outdoors.

There is scope to build evidence on wellbeing outcomes of outdoor recreation for families who take part through well-designed, rigorous and appropriate research methods which are underpinned by relevant theory and use established methods of analysis.

This will help practitioners, local authorities, commissioners and policy makers to understand what works and in which conditions.

3

Measure what matters through quality evaluation. How?

National agencies

Should have a key role in promoting agreement on definitions and developing relevant measures of wellbeing outcomes at a national level. This consistent use of wellbeing outcomes as an evaluator will allow for comparisons across the different activities in this area of interest.

They should also promote the development of a programme of wellbeing evaluation training. This would be highly useful to support service providers and key stakeholders in the outdoor recreation sectors. It would eventually ensure that a comprehensive programme of delivery includes appropriate and rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

Service providers

Need to develop appropriate evaluations to understand what works and further enrich the evidence base. Evaluations need to be appropriate for the purpose of the research and size of the programme, of enough quality to draw conclusions. We've developed a guide that might help you measure wellbeing and wider impact of your programmes on the people and communities you support, check it out here: <https://measure.whatworkswellbeing.org/>

4

Promote access and tailor it to the local context

Local authorities and national agencies should promote wide access and opportunities for family to participate in outdoor recreation. Working with informal and formal parent networks may provide opportunities to reach and engage families in outdoor activities. Providing peer support, professional support, a personalised/tailored approach that is community focused and locally available increases the opportunity to have an impact.

If you've done an evaluation of wellbeing in outdoor recreation and you've used our guide please get in touch with: measure@whatworkswellbeing.org



case study:

Urban forests as places for improving wellbeing for people with dementia



The overarching focus of this project was to explore experiences of people with early-stage dementia (living independently) taking part in urban forest activities. Understanding mental wellbeing and issues of identity underpinned the work.

The research aimed to engage with, and seek to improve, forest management approaches that are key to achieving the Forestry Commission and Scottish Government's agenda of improved mental wellbeing and social inclusion.

In 2017 approximately 93,000 people were living with dementia in Scotland (Alzheimer Scotland, 2017). Scotland's National Dementia Strategy (2013-16) asserts that dementia is one of the foremost public health challenges in the UK, and in Scotland the number of people with dementia is expected to double by 2031.

One of the main challenges set out in the Strategy is the need to offer care and support to people with dementia and their families and carers in a way which promotes wellbeing and quality of life, protects their rights, and respects their humanity.

A participatory action research approach was used to capture

and explore the experiences of an all-male group of people with early-stage dementia who engage with woodlands and forests.

These experiences were then used to co-design a 10-week programme of activities based in Callendar Wood, Falkirk, an urban forest setting for people with early-stage dementia.

Methods used to collect data from the pilot woodland activity programme included observations and interviews with participants (people with dementia and their family member carers), as well as facilitating staff (including rangers and health professionals), at the end of the 10-week programme.

Activities were facilitated by rangers and included woodland walks, bird box building, tree planting, nature photography, willow sculpting, bird and tree identification, fire lighting and woodland cooking.

Walk-along interviews were also used as a way of understanding urban forests and participant's experiences of them.

Findings from the woodland activity programme illustrate the benefits that can be gained from taking part, both for people with dementia and carers and identified five key themes:

- enhanced feeling of mental wellbeing
- supporting valued activities
- increased sense of empowerment and control
- encouraging social interaction
- connecting to nature

The pilot woodland activity programme has been shown to promote positive mental wellbeing for people with early-stage dementia, and in particular, the importance of the woodland activities as confirmation of self (Olsson et al., 2013; Sabat & Harre, 1992) was highlighted.

The findings support research by Phinney et al. (2007) who show that through doing, people with dementia find their lives to be meaningful.

The woodland activity programme is regarded as a complementary intervention, which could enhance services, such as cognitive stimulation therapy, for people with dementia.

With the prevalence of dementia expected to continue to increase for many years, it is well worth having alternative, more holistic services which are adapted for people with dementia of varying ages, with diverse interests, likes and dislikes, and from many different backgrounds and geographical locations.

Read the full case study on: www.whatworkswellbeing.org



Further related reading

[Places, spaces, people and wellbeing: full report \(2018\)](#)

[Social relations scoping review \(2017\)](#)

[Understanding local needs for wellbeing data \(2017\)](#)

[What is community wellbeing? Conceptual review \(2018\)](#)



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We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

The Centre is supported by the ESRC and partners to produce evidence on wellbeing in four areas: work and learning; culture and sport; community; and cross-cutting capabilities in definitions, evaluation, determinants and effects.

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