



Institute of Education



# Nature Nurtures Children

A summary of research for The Wildlife Trusts



Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future

## Education and The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts believe that a close connection to the natural world should be at the heart of education and learning. Everyone should have the chance to learn about wildlife and the value of nature.

The Wildlife Trusts commissioned a study by the Institute of Education at University College London (UCL) to evaluate the impact that experiencing nature has upon children. The study focused on primary school children and the effects of Wildlife Trust-led activities on their wellbeing. This is one of the largest studies into the effects of outdoor activities on children's wellbeing and views about nature.

Overall, the research revealed that children's wellbeing increased after they had spent time connecting with nature.

## A study of the impact of nature on the wellbeing of children

The UCL research team studied children participating in outdoor activities with their local Wildlife Trust, ranging from a single activity, to a series of activities over the course of several weeks. 451 children (mostly 8-9 years of age) in 12 areas across England took part by completing surveys before and after they participated in outdoor activities. Additionally, teachers, Wildlife Trust educators and 199 of the children were also observed by the UCL research team and interviewed about their experiences.

The outdoor activities involved children learning about nature, including identifying plants and trees, reflecting on their commercial value and considering the needs of different wildlife habitats.

The nature connection of the children were also measured. Nature connection refers to the level

at which a person considers nature to be a part of their identity, reflecting their emotional closeness to the natural world. Nature connection essentially includes a love of nature and care and concern for the environment.

## Key findings

After participating in supervised outdoor activities in nature:

- Children showed an overall increase in their personal wellbeing and health, with the greatest improvement being in those who initially reported low levels
- Children showed an overall increase in nature connection over time
- Children demonstrated high enjoyment levels, and were motivated and engaged
- Children showed an overall increase in pro-environmental values. These values were expressed as support for the protection of plants, animals and the environment, recycling, and reduction in energy and water use.

Increases were highest for children with the lowest initial levels of wellbeing, nature connection, and pro-environmental values.

## Engaging and connecting with nature

Surveys completed after the outdoor activities showed that the majority of children reported positive experiences and believed that they gained benefits. These findings were supported by the researcher's observations and interviews:

- children's enjoyment levels were high
- children's motivation and engagement were high
- children exhibited curiosity, active observation, and engagement with nature

## Learning within and about nature

After spending time in nature, children reported that they gained educational benefits.



90% felt they learned something new about the natural world

84% felt that they are capable of new things when they try



79% felt that the experience could help their school work

After the activities, the majority of the children (94%) reported that they enjoyed the activities and that as a result, they now enjoy being in nature more (83%). Moreover, the majority of children (89%) agreed that people should protect plants and animals.

## The Wildlife Trusts are calling for action!

Experiences in and around wild places can support children's wellbeing and their connection to nature. Crucially, spending time in nature is shown to improve children's wellbeing.

Accordingly, in order to support children's wellbeing and to secure the related benefits that arise from nature, The Wildlife Trusts are calling for the following three actions:



### **We want politicians and other public policy-makers (local and national) to change government guidance to schools to include a minimum of one hour per school day to be spent outdoors in wild play and learning.**

Children's access to nature can be limited by their location and various other barriers. For some children, spending time in nature with their school may be their only opportunity, and contribute positively to many aspects of the national curriculum. Additionally, this can provide enjoyable and beneficial experiences and lead to improved mental wellbeing. Every child should have the opportunity to learn outside at school.

### **We are calling on the Government to create a Nature Recovery Network that extends into schools and every other part of our towns, cities and villages so that everyone lives in a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world.**

There must be recognition of the diversity in people and the many ways in which they can engage with nature. This recognition may help more children see that nature is accessible for 'people like me'. Every child should have easy access to abundant wildlife and high-quality wild places where they learn and play, to increase health, wellbeing and resilience.

### **We believe that there must be an appreciation of children's individual identities.**

Some children may prefer outdoor adventure, such as den building or tree climbing while others may prefer learning about plants, animals and other wildlife. Children should be supported to allow them to foster links between their personal identities and nature. By increasing outdoor teaching time in all schools, this gives the time and scope to help children to develop their own personal connection with nature. We believe everyone should have the opportunity to experience the joy of wildlife in daily life.

**79%** felt more confident in themselves



**79%** thought that they had better relationships with their class-mates



**81%** thought that they had better relationships with their teachers



The research was undertaken between spring 2017 and spring 2019 by Dr Richard Sheldrake, Ruth Amos and Professor Michael J. Reiss, who work at University College London in its Institute of Education. Data were obtained from twelve of the 37 Wildlife Trusts in England. A full report – Sheldrake, R., Amos, R., & Reiss, M. J. (2019) Children and Nature: A research evaluation for The Wildlife Trusts is available on The Wildlife Trusts' website.

## The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts is a grassroots movement of people from a wide range of backgrounds and all walks of life, who share a set of common beliefs. It has more than 800,000 members, 40,000 volunteers, 3,000 staff and 600 trustees. Each Wildlife Trust has been formed by groups of active and motivated people getting together to make a positive difference to wildlife and future generations, starting where they live and work.



### The Wildlife Trusts

The Kiln  
Mather Road  
Newark  
Nottinghamshire NG24 1WT  
[wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org)

e: [enquiries@wildlifetrusts.org](mailto:enquiries@wildlifetrusts.org)  
t: 01636 670000  
Registered Charity No. 207238



### UCL Institute of Education

University College London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL  
[ucl.ac.uk/ioe](http://ucl.ac.uk/ioe)

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28 Charlotte Square  
Edinburgh EH2 4ET  
[postcodelottery.co.uk](http://postcodelottery.co.uk)

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