



## Research About Youth Benefits from Nature and Forest Experiences

There have been many studies in “mainstream” psychology to understand the abnormal or dysfunctional behaviors of adolescents, and possible interventions. More recent psychological research about human development has turned its focus to “positive psychology,” or the personal attributes and behaviors that are associated with people that are happy, mentally healthy and productive. In addition, there has been a modest amount of research about how nature experiences, particularly in wilderness settings, have benefited young people.



There is still much to learn. For instance, there is little empirical evidence about how forest experiences in cities and towns benefit young people. In addition, benefits evaluations in wilderness or outdoor adventure studies have not included attention to the broader scope of outcomes hinted at by recent positive psychology research.

Nature-based experiences are rarely mentioned in “mainstream” psychology discussions of healthy human development. Understanding more about the human relationship to nature may generate extensive benefits for adolescents, and the landscapes on which they are working. This fact sheet contains a summary of three youth research themes: abnormal or dysfunctional development, positive youth development, and the psychology of nature experience.

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### Abnormal/Dysfunctional Development

Psychological studies of youth development started early in the 20th century. An ongoing focus of this literature is the dysfunctional or abnormal aspects of youth personality and behavior. Efforts have been made to define and classify abnormal behaviors, then generate diagnosis strategies, and finally, develop interventions that might aid a troubled young person. Dysfunctional behaviors are generally categorized as internal and external conditions. Internal behaviors are those that are self-directed such as depression, schizophrenia, or eating disorders. External conditions are those that impact other people in the young persons’ social context, such as aggressive or violent behavior. Thousands of articles and numerous books have been written about impaired adolescent functioning.

#### READINGS:

Coleman, J. C., & L. B. Hendry. 1999. *The Nature of Adolescence*, 3rd Edition. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hoge, R. D. 1999. *Assessing Adolescents in Educational, Counseling and Other Settings*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Merrell, K. W. 2003. *Behavioral, Social and Emotional Assessment of Children and Adolescents (2nd Edition)*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

# Positive Youth Development

Research indicates that most youth traverse the teen years without seriously disrupting their own lives or the lives of others. Approximately 20 to 25 percent of adolescents exhibit problems serious enough to warrant intervention. The domain of “positive psychology” has emerged as psychologists have acknowledged that most young people are not dysfunctional, yet may need help to attain their greatest potential. This new research approach emphasizes general adjustment, encourages the capacity for optimal functioning and well-being in psychological and social domains, and refers to personal and interpersonal strengths, such as social competencies, emotional intelligence, maturity and coping strategies. Simultaneously, many organizations have planned for community programs that can aid positive development. Surprisingly, there is almost no mention of the value of nature experiences in either the psychological research or program planning writings, despite frequent references to the “nature” and “ecology” of youth development.

## READINGS:

Eccles, J. & J.A. Gootman (eds.). 2002. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Larson, R. 2000. *Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development*. *American Psychologist*, 55, 1, 170-183.

Snyder, C. R., & S. J. Lopez (eds.). 2002. *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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# Nature Experience & Youth Development

Environmental factors have largely been overlooked in understanding human development. Despite increasing interest in the role of context in understanding youth psychology, environment is usually regarded as the built settings where life unfolds, such as school and home. Most theory about youth psychology focuses on intrapsychic factors, or how a person can transform his or her self for better or worse, with little attention given to how the natural environment may contribute to issues or provide solutions.

Meanwhile a limited, yet intriguing literature has explored how adventure learning, wilderness therapy, and outdoor environmental education experiences can benefit youth. Such studies are typically smaller in scale, and involve fewer respondents than mainstream psychological studies.

Hattie and colleagues (1997) conducted a statistical review of outdoor youth programs. The results suggest that better, more carefully constructed outcomes evaluations are needed. And while there is a great deal of variability between programs, the scientists noted that, “overall, the results suggest that adventure programs can obtain notable outcomes and have particularly strong, lasting effects.” Positive affects occur in the dimensions of academic performance, leadership, self-concept, personality development, interpersonal skills and adventuresomeness.

## READINGS:

Clayton, S., & S. Opatow (eds.). 2003. *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press.

Hattie, J., H.W. Marsh, J.T. Neill, & G. E. Richards. 1997. *Adventure Education and Outward Bound: Out of Class Experiences That Make a Lasting Difference*. *Review of Educational Research*, 67, 1, 43-87.

Kahn, P. H., & S. R. Kellert (eds.). 2002. *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Orr, D.W. 1992. *Ecological Literacy. Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

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