



# Community Recreation AND Healthy Living IN Rural Settings

BY SUE GOODWIN

My happy childhood memories of growing up in Massachusetts and playing outside for hours upon hours, make me concerned about the lack of exposure to outdoor recreation and nature for today's children, no matter where they live. While some may assume that rural children and adults spend more time outside recreating in nature, recent studies have shown that this just isn't the case. In his book, "Last Child in the Woods," Richard Louv draws our attention to the work of Rhonda Clements, of Manhattanville College in New York, who surveyed 1,800 urban and rural mothers and compared their answers to those of mother's a generation ago. She found that

while over 70 percent of today's mothers recalled playing outdoors every day as children, only 26 percent said that their own children played outside everyday.

*"Surprisingly, the responses did not vary a great deal between mothers living in rural and urban areas."* Rhonda L. Clements, as quoted in "Last Child in the Woods," by Richard Louv (2005).

The assumption that people in rural communities have healthier lifestyles has been challenged by recent research as well, revealing many of the long-standing challenges rural communities face. The aging

rural population, lack of transportation, fewer municipal funding resources and lack of access to commercial fitness facilities in rural areas, limit the health and fitness opportunities available to rural residents. Deborah John of Plymouth State University states that,

"While rural living is associated with quality of life, access to outdoor recreation, ... inherently more active, the reality is that people living in rural areas have limited access to health care, commercial exercise facilities, and community or corporate physical activity programs. In addition, rural municipalities have fewer resources to

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support healthy active living. Consequently, people living in rural areas are more prone to develop conditions associated with inactivity, such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity, than their urban and suburban neighbors.”

#### **Access, Safety and Proximity Matter**

Rural children, often living great distances from their schools and village centers, may actually have less opportunity to ride their bikes or walk to school than urban children and often have to arrange extra transportation if they wish to stay after school to participate in sports programs or use the school's gymnasium or other community facilities. Even if a rural child lives near their school, parents may have safety concerns about the safety of bicycling on rural roads. Rural roads can be very dangerous. In a study of traffic accidents in 2002, by the Washington State Department of transportation, it was found that the number of fatal accidents on rural roadways was more than double that of urban roadways. Parents may not want their children walking or riding alone on rural roads and trails.

Proximity matters in access to recreation, nature and increased physical activity. Living in rural areas often means great distances between important locations. In urban settings, providing appropriate access to recreation takes proximity into account. An urban park or recreation facility's "Neighborhood Service Area" is considered to be a half-mile from its perimeter or, as some have determined, within walking distance for a healthy person. It's fairly rare to find this convenience in a rural setting.

#### **Electronic Media, Isolation and Nature Deficit Disorder in Rural Living**

Do rural children suffer "Nature Deficit Disorder?" Do they experience a lack of outdoor physical activity? It would be a mistake to think that rural children are any less susceptible to the draw of electronic media (video games, the Internet or television) than urban children. Are they more or less isolated given today's access to the virtual social networks online?

When blogger Mick Ly asked the question, "Does Internet make us isolated?" he got some interesting responses:

*"I think sometimes the Internet really makes us isolated. We don't often go to have the outdoor activities. We just stay at home and get online. We contact our friends and family by emails and chatting software. But we don't often visit them in person. Even we go shopping via the net today. This is the disadvantage of Internet to take people apart." Youless*

*"... I hear parents complain about their kids spending more time on the computer and have stopped playing outdoor games, and have very limited time socializing with family members and friends. So in my opinion, while Internet gives us a wider reach to the people around the world, it also isolates us from the people who matter more to us—our family and personal friends." Dory Vien*

Others felt that Internet access can also allow interaction with distant others, broader perspectives, and online networks of virtual friends, essentially reducing our self-perception of isolation. While reducing

a sense of isolation and providing greater access to information is a good thing, finding a balance is critically important. The question is, where does the time allocated for electronic media time come from? In other words, what activities are displaced by the use or over use of electronic media? Recent research on this issue at the University of Waterloo, using random sampling and multivariate analyses, found that electronic media use displaced both social and physical activities at significant levels (-.37 and -.23 respectively). The same study found that use of electronic media did not interfere with activities at school, so it follows that the most likely source of time displaced is a family's 1:1 time before and after school, weekends and holidays.

One balanced approach is more effective time management allocating limited time for sedentary activities without denying access to electronic media altogether combined with frequent, regularly planned family, community and age group nature-based activities and outdoor recreation.

#### **Nature and Rural Values: Finding our Common Ground**

Many rural families have lived in their community for generations and may have differing views and beliefs about nature than newer residents who have moved to a rural setting from an urban area specifically to live closer to nature. This doesn't mean that these values are in any way in conflict with each other, just that a respectful and sensitive acknowledgement of these differences in perspective exist and employing the "assumption of good intent" are important for a cohesive, inclusive,



positive and community-based approach. Finding common ground and sharing specific goals is a good place to start. While almost anyone can appreciate nature's beauty and most understand the importance of having active lifestyles to sustain good health, not everyone views access to the natural world in the same way. Barbara McCahan, director of the Center for Active Living and Healthy Communities at Plymouth State University, highlights these different perspectives, "...the woods can be as much of a deterrent to being physically active as a freeway, depending on how you look at it."

#### **Individual and Community-Based Solutions and Resources**

**Rural children** are likely to be dependent on their families for their recreation experiences and exposure to nature. With rural families working harder than ever to make ends meet and most parents working more hours per day than ever before, what is a rural family to do to provide exposure to nature and recreational activities for their family members? Knowing the problem is good, knowing effective solutions is even better. Canada has a long history of proactively

developing rural communities over vast and sometimes isolating distances and in many instances doing so with few financial resources. In "The Recreation Road – A Rural Route to Planning," the Leisure Information Network provides a step-by-step workbook for rural communities attempting to provide recreation activities for their community members. Written for volunteers, one of the great things about this workbook is that they have built in methods for planning community recreation that any lay person can understand and use. Conclusions and recommendations are based on research combined with interviews with community leaders in rural settings. The conclusions, or "impressions" as they are referred to in the workbook, suggest culturally-sensitive and useful methods to identify community strengths, challenges, needs, and goals for local recreation. One of the interesting insights provided by the Leisure Information Network of Canada is that many well-meaning efforts at developing rural recreation programs do not actually ask rural residents what they want. The workbook provides ways of identifying what local people want in recreation programs and this provides

a greater chance for a successful rural recreation effort.

Some good ideas include:

- Partnership efforts with community service non-profits like the Kiwanis Club to organize and support team sports, fishing derbies, hiking and walking clubs, nature workshops, sports challenges and village fairs.
- Tapping into cultural traditions of rural indigenous communities can expose the community at large to a more meaningful experience with nature that is based in diverse perspectives and historical values. Enriched experience and breadth of exposure enhances a child's understanding and respect for nature.
- Provide easier access to local trails and walking paths. In rural areas, trails and pathways often pass through private land and require permission to cross and this can complicate access. One shared goal might be establishing a positive relationship with these land owners. Having established standards





for hikers that respect the land owners needs while gaining permission to walk freely on private hiking trails can increase access to nature while building positive relationships within the community. A local trail map could be produced with efforts to increase eco-tourism.

- Provide positive nature-based experiences can help children develop mentally and physically. Two excellent books, filled with activities, are “Sharing Nature with Children II” by Joseph Cornell and “Nature’s Playground,” by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield. Both books are suitable for use by families or with larger community groups (and frankly, adults would enjoy them too).
- Invite county recreation organizations to participate with mobile recreation programs that bring new experiences into rural communities periodically throughout the year.
- Find out what local seniors feel would reduce isolation and increase activity.
- Form a Community Action Council.

In conclusion, it’s clear that many of the myths about rural living are being dispelled and many of the challenges of rural living are coming to light. Far from the “rose colored glasses” view of the idyllic nature of rural living held in the past, a more balanced view taking in the significant challenges along with the positive benefits of rural living is helping communities advocate for themselves and create positive change for their community members. Actively developing a positive relationship with nature and increasing outdoor physical activity is equally important for rural and urban kids.■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Goodwin is the recreation division director with Seattle Parks and Recreation.

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