


THE TEXAS PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN IN NATURE



The Texas
**Children
in Nature**
STRATEGIC PLAN

Executive Summary

Dear fellow Texans,

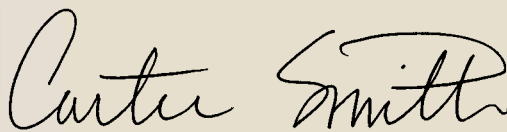
Many of us have fond childhood memories of a special place where play, imagination and wonder reigned. For most, that place was outdoors. Through these experiences, we gained understanding, appreciation and a personal relationship with the natural world.

Sadly, today's children are allowed **less time for unstructured, creative play in nature** than ever before. As the trend away from outdoor play and learning deepens, we are witnessing sobering consequences for children's health and well-being. Additionally, this youngest generation is missing out on critical experiences that lay the foundation for future stewardship of our natural resources.

We can reverse this trend. One achievable solution is to restore active play and learning in nature. This issue has brought together an unprecedented coalition of partners from all walks of life who formed the Texas Partnership for Children in Nature. These 80+ experts examined the issues and outlined their recommendations in this strategic plan.

Their wisdom, sincerity and integrity is reflected throughout the plan. By design, the plan is concise, optimizes partnerships and focuses on implementation across multiple public and private sectors.

Please consider the recommendations in this plan and join us in restoring our children's well-being and their relationship with Texas's rich natural and cultural heritage. The trend is real, the problem is solvable, and **the time to act is now.**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carter Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Carter Smith
Executive Director
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

During the 81st legislative session, organizations including the Texas Wildlife Association, the National Wildlife Federation, Texas PTA, the Texas Pediatric Society, and many other conservation, education and public health organizations advocated for the well-being of children through the creation of a formal state plan to enable children to spend more time out-of-doors and to better understand Texas' natural resources.

In fall 2009, a bipartisan group of Texas legislators requested that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, along with the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Texas Department of Agriculture form a public-private partnership to develop that strategic plan. Over 80 professionals including representatives from state and federal agencies, NGOs, health, education, natural resources, community organizations and businesses, answered the call and formed the Texas Partnership for Children in Nature.

Their discoveries included some sobering statistics:

Children ages 8 to 18 spend an average of 7.5 hours a day – over 50 hours per week – connected to a television, computer, video games and other electronic media.¹

A child is six times more likely to play a video game than ride a bike.²

Texas is home to three of the five cities with the highest obesity rates in the nation.³

In the 2009-2010 Fitnessgram school year report, only a little over 8% of 12th-grade girls and boys were deemed physically fit.⁴

Today's children may be the first generation at risk of having a shorter lifespan than their parents.⁵

The Texas Partnership for Children in Nature researched the benefits of children playing and learning in nature.

Children are:

Healthier.

Active nature play improves physical conditioning, and has a positive effect on emotional wellbeing and child development. Outdoor play has been linked to reduced risk of obesity, myopia and vitamin D deficiency.

Happier.

Nature play increases self-esteem and reduces stress. Children learn self-discipline and are more cooperative with others. Children feel more capable, confident and connected to nature.

Smarter.

Nature play stimulates creativity and improves problem-solving. Schools using environmental themes report improved academic performance. And, children who play in nature are more likely to become tomorrow's conservation leaders.



We envision that all Texas children and their families will spend more time **outdoors, engaged in nature for a happy and healthy life.**



Health

A growing body of evidence points to the benefits of physical activity and play in nature to children's physical and mental health and development. More research is needed, but we know enough to act. We envision healthier children and families as a result of increased time spent in nature and more outdoor physical activity.

Goals

Utilize healthcare and related professionals to educate families about the benefits of nature to children's physical health, emotional well-being and cognitive functioning; the importance of nature and outdoor activities for healthy child development; and safety precautions.

Encourage Texas-specific research to describe the causal relationship between nature and children's health and development, including the therapeutic benefits of nature.

As appropriate, encourage integration of nature opportunities into existing health and childcare guidelines as a strategy for improving children's health.

Promote health considerations in urban and community planning.

Education

Natural resource literacy is the ability to understand, analyze, and address major natural resource opportunities and challenges. The goals to achieve natural resources literacy through education include educating school administrators, educators, and future educators; tracking students' outcomes and experiences; integrating local informal resources; involving parents; and assessing these processes and outcomes. Our vision is that every child in Texas will be engaged in meaningful outdoor learning experiences and will achieve natural resource literacy.

Goals

Increase the understanding, appreciation and use of experiential learning outdoors within the formal education system.

Develop quality outdoor classrooms, wildlife habitats, and integrated natural play/learning environments on every Texas schoolyard.

Develop integrated and collaborative partnerships between the formal education and informal systems and resources to benefit Texas youth.

Assess the effectiveness of natural resource literacy education in Texas.

Access

Safety, convenience and multi-purpose design are essential to developing a connection with nature and a sense of place, the building blocks to conservation stewardship. We envision a Texas where children and their families have safe, convenient, sustainable and desirable access to the outdoors, where they can develop respect and appreciation for the natural environment.

Optimize access to natural areas to make them safe and convenient.

Partner with government agencies, nonprofits and the private sector, in coordination with youth groups, to provide increased access to Texas lands and waters.

Encourage creation and expansion of natural areas that provide varied and recurring nature-based experiences.

Plan, develop or expand built environments to include natural areas with interpretive elements.

Community

Connecting with nature must be relevant and welcoming to all, including unifying messages, partnerships and efforts that are respectful to Texas's diverse peoples, cultures and economic needs. We envision that the message "Happier, Healthier, Smarter" children in nature is widely and mutually communicated and that communities inspire children to maintain a lifelong connection to nature.

Raise awareness and action among adults and children through consistent and unified communication.

Create community-based regional partnerships throughout Texas to increase "children in nature" activities.

Promote the cultural and economic gateways and benefits through nature-based opportunities.

Goals

Goals

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Private and public entities must work together to implement this plan, relying on the leadership of regional collaborations and a state coalition. Implementation strategies developed from a December 2010 state conference of stakeholders should guide actions. The following additional efforts are underway to advance the implementation of the Texas Children in Nature Strategic Plan.

Marketing

A unifying message and brand, with audience-specific tool kits, will help communicate and promote this important initiative. Research is needed to establish baselines for the plan's goals. The Marketing Team will further identify the marketing implications associated with the plan's strategic goals.

Policy and Legislative

Policy priorities include acquisition of natural areas close to population centers, funding for the state parks system and local park grants programs, and support for outdoor and natural resource education at public schools. The Policy and Legislative Team will be working with partner organizations and legislative staff to identify policy responses that will advance the Texas Children in Nature Strategic Plan.

1 Kaiser Family Foundation. *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*. Publication Number: 8010. Publish Date: 2010-01-20.

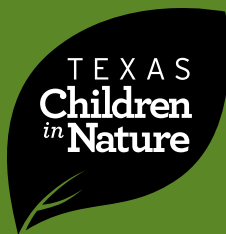
2 Figures based on surveys from *A Special Report on Youth, The Outdoor Foundation*, 2010 and Kaiser Family Foundation.

3 Obesity is defined as having a body mass index at or above the 95th percentile. *Childhood Obesity Prevention in Texas*. Workshop Summary. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, Nyberg K, Burns AC, Parker L, editors. Institute of Medicine. October 21, 2009.

4 Texas Education Agency, Physical Fitness Assessment Initiative, Summary data 2207-2010 report.

5 Ludwig DS (2007). *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357(23): 2325-27.

TEXAS
Children
in Nature



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