

Cities Connecting
Children to Nature

CITYWIDE PLANNING FOR EQUITABLE ACCESS TO NATURE





Introduction

Setting out to connect children to nature in a city requires a systems approach to achieve equity, health and other goals. Traditionally, many have thought of children's outdoor time in nature as the responsibility of families, community-based organizations and city park departments. Now, as urbanization increases and children experience more time indoors, cities and their partners must consider a broader approach to changing the overall system that includes multiple aspects of city government and community collaboration.

By adopting a “systems approach,” CCCN staff encourage cities to focus on the whole picture, not just a single element, with an appreciation for the wider context and interactions among different cross-sector components.

This graphic depicts sample elements to consider when addressing children's equitable access to nature.

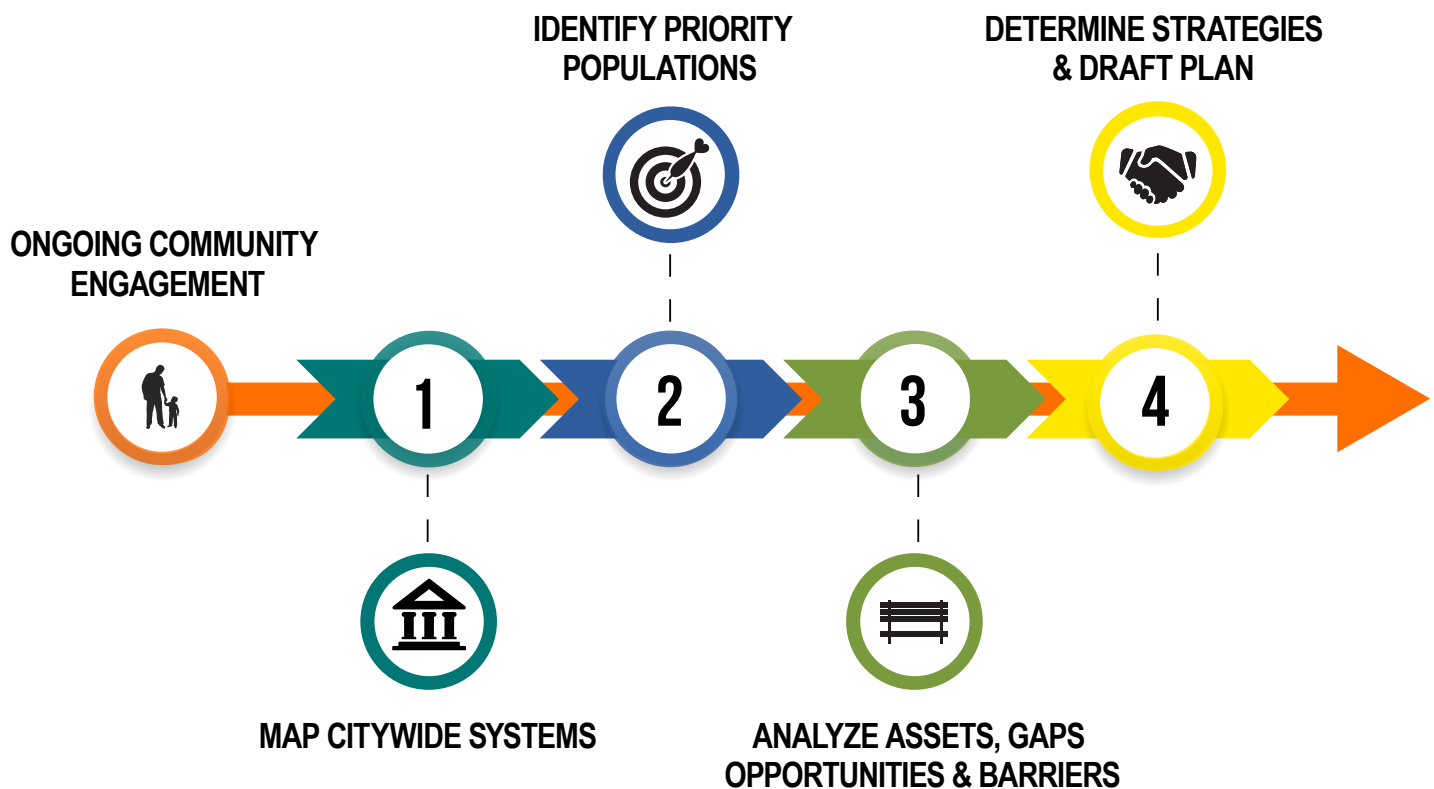
Sample Elements of a Systems Approach to Connecting Children with Nature



Planning for Citywide Implementation of Strategies

Planning and identifying citywide strategies to address equitable access to nature involves many stakeholders, and community engagement steps will prove essential to analysis and decision-making. During the planning phase, partnership development, community input, and potential funding opportunities may all present new directions, so it will not always be a linear process like the one shown below. Users of the tools presented here may view this planning phase as an opportunity to lay the groundwork for dynamic systems change within a city.

This diagram demonstrates the activities for a citywide planning process.





Toward Understanding Systems Citywide

The tools provided here support cities in understanding the status of the system within a city related to four main categories: stakeholders, local infrastructure, programs and experiences for children and youth, as well as policies and partnerships. Action in these four areas can combine and cross-connect to support more equitable access to nature. This thorough assessment of the components at play in each of those domains will provide city leaders with actionable understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to creating more abundant and equitable access to nature for all residents, especially those in low-income communities.

Community Engagement

CCCN staff recommend that cities employ a variety of community engagement techniques to support the systems approach and analysis. With a focus on equity in access, the city team should collect and analyze information by deeply engaging community leaders, residents and partner organizations to inform the assessment process. Consider collecting information on current and historical uses of green spaces, attitudes of residents of various ages and cultures, and barriers that might exist to outdoor time in nature. Also consider which priority neighborhoods and populations to engage in the planning activities to inform assets, gaps, opportunities and barriers to nature connection.

Identifying Priority Neighborhoods and Populations

Analyzing data with regard to specific neighborhoods or populations in your city constitutes one key option to inform the planning process. To identify these neighborhoods and populations you may want to consider factors such as highest need or potential for change. Priority areas or groups might include:

- Low-income neighborhoods or communities of color without equitable or abundant access to nature;
- Socioeconomic, racial or ethnic groups with documented low participation in nature-based programs or non-beneficiaries of policies;
- Neighborhoods or populations with high concentrations of culturally-specific groups who might bring specific assets, capacity, and barriers to nature participation; and
- Neighborhoods or populations with a high concentration of health issues, such as obesity.

After identifying priority neighborhoods or populations, deeper investigation might include hosting field inquiries in settings such as cultural centers, religious centers, and schools to provide direct engagement with intended populations. Analysis of assets, strengths, and gaps should involve deep consultation with traditionally un- or under-consulted populations and neighborhoods.

Determine Strategies & Draft Citywide Implementation Plan

After completing the systems approach tools and engaging community constituents, the next step often involves close analysis of the information in order to identify strategies that will address equitable access to nature. Citywide assets, gaps, opportunities and barriers get deeper consideration across all areas of stakeholders, infrastructure, policy, experiences and programs.

The CCCN staff recommends conducting a series of convenings with key partners and community stakeholders with the goal of identifying strategies that will yield the surest results in addressing access to nature for children and families. Cities should consider some near-term strategies that will create visibility, momentum and continue to grow stakeholder engagement. Long-term strategies that will require additional funding, policy change or partnership cultivation remain important and essential to sustaining the impact of city efforts to improve children's nature access long into the future. To learn more about potential strategies, please refer to the [CCCN Municipal Action Guide](#).



Understanding Systems Citywide

1. Identifying Children and Nature Stakeholders

This *System Stakeholders to Connect Children to Nature* tool serves to identify current or potential partners or stakeholders across your city who might support future efforts. To maximize benefits from using the tool, consider evaluating:

- Relationships and levels of collaboration among city departments, such as transportation, libraries, and parks;
- Relationships and levels of collaboration between the city government and other local, county or state agencies such as schools and public health agencies;
- Distinctions between those stakeholders who have already engaged in children and nature efforts and those that can make contributions, but likely require further case-making and cultivation as key partners;
- Resources currently available for partnership and collaborations.

Consider photocopying the tool to use in a small group exercise among the planning team, or drop the graphic onto a slide and fill in the blanks as a group on a projected slide. If other categories of partners or stakeholders emerge, add to the list as necessary.

System Stakeholders to Connect Children to Nature

CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Stakeholders:

- Policymakers**
- Research Organizations**
- Funding Partners**
- Intermediaries & Technical Assistance Providers**
- Others**
- Parks, Nature Centers & Env. Ed. Agencies & Orgs**
- Out-of-School Time Providers/Network**
- School Districts**
- Community-Based Orgs**
- Early Childhood & Pre-K**
- Parents & Adult Mentors**

Collaborators & Partners

2. Mapping Children and Nature Infrastructure

Providing increased access to nature often involves removing barriers to and increasing prevalence of green spaces, such as parks, trails, community gardens, and natural areas. Understanding barriers and prevalence of access requires, at minimum, an update of the physical map of places and spaces. This will likely not prove sufficient as the only source of information regarding access, yet it serves an important role in initial systems mapping. Knowing the geographic, demographic and topographic “green map” of a city can serve as a driver to prioritize populations and neighborhoods for closer consideration and consultation.

To create a more nuanced depiction, CCCN staff recommends the type of layered approach that GIS makes possible; for instance, correlating data sets to understand who has access to what, where, and when (seasonal variation will likely play a part for some cities). When possible, connect and overlay data from parks, planning, and health departments to create a comprehensive picture of nature access in your city. Examples of additional layers to add to the baseline physical map include demographic, health, and school performance data. If your city has limited GIS capacity, consider using other means to create a layered full picture.

This *Infrastructure Components to Connect Children and Nature* tool suggests four main types of infrastructure items to consider mapping, and it functions as a checklist regarding availability of data. Experience to date suggests that gathering knowledgeable GIS or data staff from relevant departments to fill out the checklist works best.

The CCCN Metrics Toolkit provides additional insights into Indicators, measures and tools that a city can use to understand the dimensions of its physical infrastructure.

Infrastructure Components to Connect Children and Nature

MAP ELEMENT	SOURCE OF DATA (within City Government Departments, Community Organizations or Coordinating Agencies)	DATA EASILY SHARED? (Y/N)	DATA FORMAT
Green Spaces			
Parks lands and waters			
Prevalence and proximity of parks to neighborhoods and residents			
Tree canopy			
Public natural areas			
Private lands, publicly accessible			
Biodiversity			
Greenways and nature trails			
Lakes and waterways (rivers, riparian areas, etc.)			
Green schoolyards at K-12 schools			
Nature play and learning areas in early childhood education facilities			
Nature playgrounds			
Accessible natural elements in transportation corridors			
Community gardens			
Natural green infrastructure (stormwater or water utility)			
Other nearby nature:			

Infrastructure Components to Connect Children and Nature

MAP ELEMENT	SOURCE OF DATA (within City Government Departments, Community Organizations or Coordinating Agencies)	DATA EASILY SHARED? (Y/N)	DATA FORMAT
Transportation Systems			
Bicycle lanes			
Sidewalks			
Trails			
Other transportation:			
Demographics			
Race			
Ethnicity			
Socioeconomic status			
Geographic concentration of populations (e.g., children or other target demographics)			
Other demographic:			
Health			
Overweight/Obesity			
Attention Deficity and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)			
Childhood depression			
Other health:			

3. Inventorying Children and Nature Experiences and Programs

The *Children and Nature Experiences and Programs* tool (template below) serves to inventory current programs designed to provide children with experiences of connecting with nature. By completing this inventory, cities will gain insight into the prevalence of citywide efforts and the gaps and disparities that may exist, especially for priority populations and neighborhoods. If a city committed to equitable access finds that one or more programs do not collect demographic information, additional efforts must follow to collect and disaggregate program data—or make considered estimates—to understand which children participate, where and at what frequency.

To complete this tool, CCCN staff recommend either 1) a planning group brainstorming exercise followed by investigation where information is missing, or 2) a survey or interview series to collect the relevant information from programs on the list.

Children and Nature Experiences and Programs

Department / Program	Non-Profit & Community-Based Organization Partners	Program Frequency	Annual Funding	Funding Source	Impact / Outcomes	Demographics (who, where)	# of Children
Parks & Recreation							
Public Libraries							

Children and Nature Experiences and Programs

Department / Program	Non-Profit & Community-Based Organization Partners	Program Frequency	Annual Funding	Funding Source	Impact / Outcomes	Demographics (who, where)	# of Children
Public Works							
Health & Human Services							
Streets / Transportation							
Stormwater / Utilities							
School District							
Other							

4. Conducting a Children and Nature Policy Landscape Scan

The *Children and Nature City Policy Landscape Scan* serves as a tool to assess the status of policies, plans, ordinances or legislation that support opportunities for children's equitable access to nature. Cities seeking systematic ways to affect and sustain children's access to nature must consider existing and potential policies across city departments, statutes, and codes, that could support or deter their efforts. Policies offer a means to pick up and codify elements within a city such as programs or isolated successes.

By conducting this scan, a city gains insight into existing policies or plans to leverage to its benefit, as well as gaps that might demonstrate opportunities for greater focus and cross-departmental collaboration. The scan can ignite discussion and cooperation among departments while also supporting collaboration with county and state government and community-based organization partners. Cities have deployed a variety of methods to complete this tool successfully, including 1) a team approach in which multiple departments collaborate over a period of time to identify priority areas and 2) an initial one-time multi-stakeholder convening, at which participants divide the scan into categories for focused analysis. Regardless of completion method, CCCN staff intend the scan as a flexible and generative tool that permits local opportunities to emerge.



Children and Nature City Policy Landscape Scan

Policy Area / Type <i>Guiding question: Has your city government instituted a systematic means through public document, public statement, legislation/ordinance, strategy or program, or budget allocation to provide children with more equitable/increased access to nature?</i>	Status (Passed, Pending, Proposed or Considering)	Lead (Agency, Department, Organization & Point of Contact)	Annual Resources for Implementation	Review (Process & Schedule for Upcoming Review or Renewal)
Policy Statements				
Broad foundational policy statement (e.g., Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights)				
City council resolution(s)				
Other policy statements:				
Zoning				
Residential zoning				
Park/green space dedication requirements & development fees				
Other zoning:				
Transportation				
Connections, corridors, access (e.g., Complete Streets, Green Streets, bikeways, greenways, safe routes)				
Integration with transit				
Other transportation:				
Equity				
Equity tests or standards (e.g., equity impact assessment)				
Other cross-cutting equity provisions				
Health equity				
Other equity:				

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Youth Development, Schools & More				
Access to nature for students in all levels of schools & learning environments (e.g., early childhood, green schoolyards, school gardens, scheduled time outdoors, outdoor recess with access to nature)				
Access to nature during afterschool hours				
Youth jobs in nature (e.g., summer youth employment, internships, pathways programs, corps)				
Support for families in nature (e.g., Family Nature Clubs)				
Nature-based public library programs				
Shared/joint use with school districts				
Other youth development:				
Green Space & Parks				
Tree canopy				
Biodiversity, native plants				
Community gardens, urban agriculture				
Vest pocket parks, pop-up parks, park within 10-minute walk for all residents				
Park design standards (e.g., incorporation of natural features, nature play areas)				
Green infrastructure in parks				
Adjacent park-library partnerships				
Liability or risk guidelines/policies to support nature play				
Other:				

Children and Nature City Policy Landscape Scan

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Public Works & Utilities				
Green infrastructure (e.g. rain gardens and other natural stormwater management, urban stream restoration, rain gardens)				
Tree planting & canopy restoration				
Other public works or public utility:				
Policy Linkages				
City Comprehensive Plan (e.g. any provision that speaks specifically to connecting children to nature)				
Planning / Zoning Code				
Parks Master Plan				
Sustainability Plan				
Healthy Eating-Active Living Policy or Plan				
Health Impact Assessment Policy or Plan				
Community Health Needs Assessment				
“Vertical linkage” with state and county policy (e.g., state environmental education, outdoor education and tourism policy)				
“Horizontal linkage” with neighboring cities (e.g., green-belts)				
Other policy linkages:				

Children and Nature City Policy Landscape Scan

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Budget & Appropriations				
Operating department budget line item				
Mayor or Council discretionary grant				
Capital budget specification / line item				
Added / leveraged city staff position(s)				
Slots in city summer youth employment program				
Added / leveraged consulting support or staff position in partner agency				
Application for / share of pass-through state/federal funds				
Application for private philanthropic funds				
Dedicated share of bond issue revenue				
Other financial:				

For additional Cities Connecting Children to Nature information and resources, please visit the [CCCN Resource Hub](#).

For additional assistance using the tools provided within this document, please contact info@childrenandnature.org.

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