



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

BRIDGING THE FIELDS OF CHILDREN TO NATURE AND SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Cities stand at the front line of the climate crisis. Their densely developed neighborhoods, layers of infrastructure, and higher percentages of vulnerable populations all face risks from the effects of climate change, including extreme heat, sea-level rise, and flooding from storms and excessive rainfall.

Several cities have met this challenge by implementing coordinated responses backed by dedicated staffing in sustainability and resilience offices. Typically, these responses focus on emissions reduction, nature-based solutions, and green infrastructure such as bioswales, resilience parks, rain gardens, community gardens, and expanded urban forestry.

Largely in parallel, across the nation and within the New York metropolitan region, city leaders and community groups increasingly seek to redress the “nature deficit disorder” that has resulted from too much childhood time spent inside. Children with regular access to nature gain multiple forms of support for healthy development through active outdoor play and learning – yet those with the least access often concentrate in densely developed cities.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN), a joint initiative of National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network, acknowledges the pressing challenges of climate change and inequitable access to nature that many cities currently face. To

help address those challenges, CCCN teamed with the Regional Plan Association (RPA) to demonstrate potential synergy in policies and practices in order to bridge these complementary fields.

Cities and their leaders have an opportunity to “name and claim” mutual benefits from climate resilience policies that connect children to nature more equitably, and vice versa. For instance, green infrastructure in parks and schoolyards can provide children with more chances for close-to-home nature play and learning. Bioswales can become places to play. Urban forests can be destinations for exploration. And rain gardens can be interpretive stations. What’s more, including children in the development of sustainability plans broadens civic engagement and initiates lifelong environmental awareness.

Building upon an initial set of examples from the tri-state area of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, CCCN and RPA have identified four initial areas of opportunity for city leaders nationwide to “build a bridge” between fields for the mutual benefit of children, families, residents, and ecosystems.

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AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR CITY LEADERS

OPPORTUNITY	PATH TO ACTIVATION
 <p>FORMALIZE TIES among local agencies, departments, and offices to increase capacity to foster equitable connections to nature for children while achieving sustainability goals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key stakeholders interested in sustainability, resilience, and engaging children – including city planning, parks and recreation, public works, libraries, sustainability, and public health and childcare agencies and offices, as well as metropolitan and regional planning organizations and school districts • Create a common child-focused policy agenda that cuts across departments and agencies • Make the case for climate resiliency initiatives that expand and enhance children's access to nature, and develop follow-on programs and projects • Connect educational curriculum and programming in schools and community settings to sustainability and resilience projects
 <p>ORIENT RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS to include a focus on children and nature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize sustainability and resilience projects that focus on equitably connecting children with nature in locations where children learn and play • Use sustainability and resilience projects to expand access to natural landscapes across neighborhoods
 <p>ENGAGE CHILDREN AND YOUTH in shaping resilience and sustainability plans and projects to instill a sense of ownership and stewardship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the engagement to the places where children learn and play • Create spaces and means for youth to provide input in public engagement processes
 <p>PURSUE FUNDING AND INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS to advance sustainability, resilience, and connections between children and nature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage current funding opportunities, including the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act • Utilize funding sources creatively to achieve multiple purposes • Partner with community-based and nonprofit organizations

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ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE WHILE CONNECTING CHILDREN TO NATURE

A review of activity in the tri-state New York metropolitan region surfaced several promising examples of city-led efforts that connect children and youth to nature more equitably, while also advancing sustainability and resilience goals. These brief case studies can serve as inspiration for other cities in the region and the nation.



FORMALIZE TIES: COMMON POLICY AGENDA



PLAN BRIDGEPORT

Bridgeport, CT

[Plan Bridgeport](#) is a ten-year comprehensive plan published in 2019 by the city Office of Planning and Economic Development, which identifies “Bridgeport Values Nature” as a guiding principle for this coastal city with a large low- to moderate-income population. The plan highlights ways that development has affected the city’s natural environment, proposes steps to address climate change and better integrate urban life with the natural environment, and establishes implementation goals including “Connect Education with Nature.” Subtasks within that goal include educating residents about natural habitats and biodiversity, adding more environmental education to school curriculums, and using Bridgeport’s natural resources to create nature-based learning.



FORMALIZE TIES: COMMON POLICY AGENDA



SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN

Newark, NJ

Children appear as a major focus of Newark’s first [Sustainability Action Plan](#), largely in the context of creating healthier homes and reducing asthma rates. The plan also mentions aligned projects of local stakeholders, including Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) and Greater Newark Conservancy, to provide environmental education and nature connections for children. Notably, the plan includes photos and text of ICC staff teaching children about sustainability efforts such as reducing food waste through composting in a community garden. The Plan also delves into ways to deploy green infrastructure throughout the city, including [park and playground projects of the Trust for Public Land](#). The Plan notes that these playgrounds can serve as infrastructure against climate change and provide opportunities to connect with nature, through natural grass areas, planting beds, and many new trees. Future park projects will do even more to incorporate green elements that will assist with stormwater management, including rain gardens, vegetable beds, and other permeable surfaces.

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ORIENT RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS



Joe Shlabotnik

CONNECTING CHILDREN WITH JAMAICA BAY

New York, NY

Combined efforts of the New York City Parks Department, elected officials, and local advocates have resulted in the protection and expansion of public access to the salt marsh ecosystem in the Jamaica Bay estuary. This important buffer protects the coast from sea level rise and storm surge. In this case, [Sunset Cove Park](#) opened in 2019 on the former site of a marina and highly polluted dumping ground, replaced by 4.5 acres of restored salt marsh, the installation of 16,000 tons of clean sand, and the construction of a walking trail. Next steps include the creation of an outdoor classroom for children, with boardwalks that offer shoreline access and a seasonal dock and oyster garden.



ENGAGE CHILDREN AND YOUTH



City of New Haven

STORMWATER DRAIN ART IN NEW HAVEN

New Haven, CT

[Lots of Fish](#) in New Haven provides public education and outreach about stormwater systems with support from several City of New Haven departments and a range of other partners, as part of the city's [Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System \(MS4\) permit](#) with the US Environmental Protection Agency. Young city residents led by local [social impact artist JoAnn Moran](#) decorate storm drains with latex paint to bring attention to keeping the drains clean. Some designs look like the mouths of animals and carry the message that only water should go into their mouths, not pollution or other debris. Youth hired by Green Jobs 4 Youth, a [youth service corps](#) organization, and volunteers from [Evergreen Family Oriented Tree, Inc.](#) maintain the painted storm drains.

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PURSUE INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS



IRONBOUND COMMUNITY CORPORATION'S DOWN BOTTOM FARMS

Newark, NJ

The Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) has transformed an abandoned rail yard in the heart of the Ironbound neighborhood into a community garden with a green space designed to increase community resilience. ICC manages [Down Bottom Farms](#) under a lease agreement with the City of Newark and the New Jersey School Development Authority. The farms will feature expanded educational programming for children, including a dedicated garden area for children between the ages of two to six to learn about farming through play activities. Partners include the [NJ Tree Foundation](#), the [Rutgers University Cooperative Extension Water Resources Program](#), job training participants, and volunteers.



PURSUE INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS



GREEN SCHOOLYARDS

New York, NY

The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYCDEP) and the School Construction Authority have partnered with the nonprofit Trust for Public Land (TPL) with a goal of creating 20 additional green schoolyards between 2021 and 2025. Through its [Community Schoolyards project](#), Trust for Public Land builds schoolyards that also function as green infrastructure by incorporating bioswales, rain gardens, trees, and other elements that absorb stormwater and reduce the urban heat island effect, while providing nature-based learning and play right outside the schoolhouse door. Students join professionals hand-in-hand to design the green schoolyards.

HOW TO ENGAGE

FIND RESOURCES

Explore the CCCN Resource Hub, www.childrenandnature.org/cccn offering a Municipal Action Guide, planning materials, and strategy tools.

GET CONNECTED

Sign up for the CCCN newsletter at www.childrenandnature.org/cccn and follow [#citykids2nature](#).

Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) is an initiative of the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network, made possible with support from The JPB Foundation. CCCN helps city leaders and their partners ensure equitable opportunities for children to play, learn and grow in nature. This paper was created in partnership with the [Regional Plan Association](#) (RPA.) Find more resources at the [CCCN Resource Hub](#).