



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

NLC NATIONAL
LEAGUE
OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

Children
& Nature
Network

NATURE-BASED PROGRAMS AT CITY FACILITIES: A PATHWAY

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIES

Cities provide learning and play environments for young children in a variety of settings including recreation centers, nature centers, libraries, gardens, museums, and zoos. Expanding nature-based programs in these places provides young children opportunities to learn about, feel comfortable in, and develop an appreciation for the natural world. Expansion also contributes to meeting a variety of city priorities including school readiness, early childhood quality improvement, and climate resilience and environmental stewardship.

Through its 2021 landscape scan, CCCN confirmed several ways that cities can utilize public facilities to provide nature-based programs for their youngest residents:

Expand programming for young children at city-run nature centers. City nature centers can develop programs specifically for toddlers and preschoolers, including nature story times, animal and garden programs, and nature walks. They can also provide family-based programs that engage young children and distribute resources and materials to families to support nature play. Cities can also expand awareness of such programs, and ensure that programs are culturally appropriate.

Incorporate nature connection at city facilities offering programs to young children. City recreation and community centers provide a range of programs to toddlers and preschoolers, including childcare, homeschool, and summer programs. Cities can include nature programming at these sites, and ensure equitable access to these by addressing barriers such as cost and transportation. Innovative approaches include creation of mobile play/education units.

Provide access to green space and nature-based activities for child care providers and early childhood education programs. Cities can support early childhood providers, programs, and preschools with enhanced opportunities for nature exposure by providing access to green settings through field trips and park access. City staff can also deliver nature-based programs in early childhood settings, and provide training for early childhood educators.

Develop or expand Nature-Smart Libraries. Libraries in some cities provide nature-based programs and resources including nature-themed storytimes and learning activities to promote nature connection, literacy, and environmental education. As city-wide systems, libraries offer the opportunity to reach children who might not otherwise have access to quality nature experiences. Nature-Smart Libraries can also engage family and caregivers to support nature connection at home.

CITY EXAMPLES

Austin: Austin Parks and Recreation Department's [Tiny Tots](#) program at the Hancock Recreation Center provides 3-4 year olds the opportunity to engage in nature programming.

Boulder: As part of a collective impact project called Nature Kids Boulder, Boulder Housing Partners collaborates with the Thorne Nature Center to offer a nature-based caretaker and child experiences program, [Lil' Explorers](#), to families in underserved communities. In this program, families receive a series of five nature-based programs (taught in Spanish) where educators guide families to experience "nature play" and speak to the benefits of nature play for children's development with parents. A deep sense of community grows from the programs and barriers are addressed through transportation offerings. Program managers are tracking the time spent with families and measuring outcomes of program participation.

Louisville: [Louisville ECHO](#), a partnership between the Jefferson Memorial Forest, the Natural Areas Division of Louisville Parks & Recreation, and Wilderness Louisville, Inc, seeks to create "cradle-to-career" access to nature for young people in the neighborhoods of West and South Louisville. ECHO consists of four complimentary components including nature play with the ECHOMobile traveling box truck, in school programming and field trips, out-of-school time programming with partner community centers, and a summer job component for youth 16-21. ECHO serves approximately 2500 youth every year and is grant funded by local, federal, and private foundation funding.

San Antonio: One aspect of the San Antonio Public Library's [Little Read Wagon](#) program focuses on building parent capacity to engage with young children ages 0-5, through an emphasis on outdoor play. Library staff engage families and caregivers by promoting child-centered play with natural materials like tree cookies, rocks, sand and other loose parts. Programming is provided year-round and free of charge at various park locations throughout the city.

Saint Paul: To support city professionals to enhance their ability to provide nature-based programming, the Parks & Recreation Department in Saint Paul is offering nature-based professional development to youth services staff across the city, including library staff working with young children. For example, Saint Paul developed [Nature Smart Libraries](#) which include different nature-themed backpacks to check out. Some backpacks are geared for young children, and include items like books, magnifying glasses, and toy compasses to encourage nature exploration.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Cities interested in implementing nature-based programs for young children can take a number of steps:

- **Inventory existing programs serving young children at city facilities.** Identify programs, including those at recreation and community centers and libraries, to document what each offers, location, and demographics of participants.
- **Engage with the community to determine satisfaction with existing programming and desired nature-based programming.** Survey parents/caregivers and community members to identify and address barriers to accessing programming including cost, hours, transportation, quality, language, and types of programming. A comprehensive community engagement process includes translations in

common languages and outreach by trusted community partners.

- **Consider ways to introduce or expand nature-based components of existing programs.** Examine whether, for instance, staff of the city parks department can provide professional development opportunities for staff of other agencies, organizations, and programs. Another approach would be for city agencies to partner with community-based organizations with expertise in nature and environmental education, or with national or regional organizations that provide training and curricula. Cities can work to embed nature connection in existing programs which reach families with young children, such as parent education programming.
- **Identify ways to expand opportunities for young children within existing city-sponsored nature-based programs.** Explore ways to expand programming for toddlers and preschoolers at nature centers, zoos, and public gardens. Examine ways to expand reach by offering field trip sites for early childhood programs, or supporting creative approaches such as “mobile nature vans” that visit childcare sites. City agencies and partners can offer nature-material giveaways, such as seeds or fresh produce, or lending kits for young children and their families.
- **Raise awareness of programs, and increase access.** Ensure families, especially those who have the fewest opportunities to access nature, know about these programs through marketing, direct outreach, and partnerships with local organizations, such as early childhood providers, that serve these families. City leaders and partners can consider developing an online resource hub or central location which provides information on nature-based programming and events and the importance of early childhood nature connection. Partners, including parks and recreation agencies, libraries, or other nature-based programming providers can all share information through the hubs.

PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSIDER

Cities wanting to expand their nature-based programs for young children at public facilities can tap into many local, state/regional, and national resources and partners:

Local: Some cities have local nonprofits or coalitions focused on enhancing access to the outdoors. In addition to Parks and Recreation Departments, public agency partners can also include housing authorities, community development agencies, school districts, and public works or forestry departments (for loose parts). Consider partnering with local organizations which also focus on young children’s wellbeing and have trusted relationships with families with young children to encourage connecting to nature at public facilities. Trusted partners include pediatricians, Children’s Hospitals, local Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) agencies, Children’s Hospitals, home visiting programs, and parent education programs.

Regional/State: State-level environmental and outdoor education associations can provide resources and ideas for nature-based programming. State and local [cooperative extension programs](#) also have resources to support non-formal education, particularly around farming and gardening.

National: Several national organizations support nature curricula and programming suitable for use in public facilities, including the [Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#) and the [Natural Start Alliance](#).