

Changes in Outdoor Recreation among Rural and Urban Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Fathers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Using the Family-Based Nature Activities Framework, we examined fathers' perceptions of how their children's outdoor recreation changed during COVID-19, and differences between rural and urban participants' outdoor experiences. Fathers of children ages 5-12 (n = 26) participated in semi-structured interviews. Results showed that due to sweeping lifestyle changes, fathers reported increased time spent outdoors and the development of new outdoor family routines as a way to promote children's health, fulfill caretaking responsibilities, and promote family relationships. Urban fathers reported more outdoor restrictions due to local policies whereas rural fathers reported engaging in a larger variety of nearby outdoor activities.

Keywords: outdoor recreation, COVID-19 pandemic, rural, urban, children 5-12

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) negatively disrupted the experiences and everyday routines of most families with children (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). Parents reported increased financial and employment concerns (Recto & Lesser, 2020), exacerbated feelings of stress due to the merging of personal and professional spaces and overlapping responsibilities of employment and caretaking (Burk et al., 2020), and more negative mental health outcomes than nonparents (Elder & Greene, 2021). Scholars found that parents' and children's psychological health was negatively impacted due to fear related to COVID-19 and the indirect effects of the pandemic impacted daily routines (e.g., quarantine, school closures) (Chawla et al., 2021; Cusinato, 2020). Furthermore, Gassman-Pines et al. (2020) discovered that parents' psychological health was strongly associated with the number of crisis-related hardships, including job loss, caregiving burdens, and illness. Parents who reported a decline in psychological health were also more likely to experience a decline in their children's behavioral health, loss of childcare, and increased food insecurity (Patrick et al., 2020).

Children's psychological health was also negatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). Children experienced increased anxiety associated with changes to their everyday routines (e.g., reduced physical activity, increased technology usage) (Chawla et al., 2021). Children also felt disconnected from peers and social support systems outside of the family (Singh et al., 2020). Moreover, families who struggled to address their children's most basic needs (e.g., food, healthcare, safety) were particularly vulnerable to increased psychological strain due to sudden disconnect from services ensuring children's everyday care and well-being (Patrick et al., 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Wong et al., 2020).

Scholars recommend engagement in regular health-promoting activities to reduce the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on psychological health (Chawla et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2020). Getting adequate physical activity and sleep as well as reducing internet use were among some recommendations to improve psychological health (Chawla et al., 2021). One effective, pandemic-friendly yet often overlooked way to promote health and family interactions is engagement in family-based nature activities (Izenstark & Ebata, 2017; 2019). Family-based nature activities include participating in outdoor recreation (e.g., hiking, biking), using outdoor spaces (e.g., parks), and/or taking family trips to natural areas (Izenstark & Ebata, 2016). Research highlights how engagement in outdoor recreation can provide opportunities to promote physical and psychological health (Chawla, 2015; Ewert et al., 2014), foster social cohesion (Hartig et al., 2014) and positively influence family relationships (Izenstark & Ebata, 2016; 2017). During the pandemic, researchers found that children's participation in outdoor recreation was associated with bolstered resilience to stressors (Jackson et al., 2021), self-efficacy, positive youth development (Reed et al., 2022), and increased participation in physical activity (Rossi et al., 2021). Given the benefits of participation in family-based nature activities, we wanted to better understand fathers' outdoor experiences with their children and how they changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We specifically interviewed fathers for several reasons. Fathers enact a vital role in their children's leisure experiences (Bauer & Giles, 2018; Creighton et al., 2015; Fletcher, 2020; Jenkins, 2009). These experiences not only provide a means for building relationships, life skills, and shared time together, but may influence men's understanding of their own identity as a father (Creighton et al., 2015). While societal expectations towards fathers have changed in the last several decades (Taylor et al., 2013), many fathers engage less with their children than mothers, and often view themselves as less competent caretakers than mothers (Doucet, 2018). However, when it comes to participation in leisure and recreation, fathers often feel empowered to bond, communicate and build meaningful relationships with their children (Fletcher, 2020; Jenkins, 2009; Sharaievska & Hodge, 2018).

Moreover, past research shows that fathers' active involvement plays a vital role in their children's lives (Buswell et al., 2012; Doucet, 2018). Knoester and Randolph (2019) found that fathers of nine-year-old children who reported participating in outdoor activities or sports with their child at least once per week experienced improved father-child closeness and self-reported health. Despite existing research on the importance of fathers' engagement in children's lives, the literature on how nature affects children and their caregivers together is rather limited (Chawla, 2015). For example, Hodge et al. (2015) conducted an integrative review of the family leisure literature published between 1990 and 2012 and found that mothers/caregivers/decision-makers were the focus of more than three times the number of articles than fathers.

Past research provides important insights on the role of fathers' involvement with their children in outdoor adventure programs (Overholt, 2022), outdoor risky play behavior (Bauer & Giles, 2019), sports (Fletcher, 2020) and active play (Creighton et al., 2015). However, one context that is missing from the literature is how fathers and children engage in outdoor activities together close to home—an environment in which children spent increased time during COVID-19 restrictions (Nathan et al., 2021). Simultaneously, many communities temporarily closed schools, playgrounds, recreational facilities and other outdoor environments, and thus neighborhood outdoor spaces became increasingly important places for children's leisure and physical activity (Mitra et al., 2020).

Due to stay-at-home restrictions and closures of leisure locations throughout the pandemic, families were encouraged to recreate outdoors and close to home (Perry et al., 2021). However, families' outdoor recreation opportunities differed based on neighborhood environment and local policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (de Lannoy et al., 2020; Mitra et al., 2020). For example, de Lannoy et al. (2020) discussed differences in COVID-19-related restrictions implemented in outdoor spaces in Canadian provinces and found a correlation between severity of restrictions and decreased children's outdoor experiences. Similarly, Mitra et al. (2020) found that living in a house (versus apartment), a low dwelling density neighborhood, and access to parks was correlated with increased outdoor activities among children. Research on participation in family-based nature activities among rural versus urban participants is needed (Izenstark et al., 2016), especially during the pandemic, to better understand how local policy restrictions and access to

outdoor spaces influenced children's outdoor experiences in both types of locations.

Theoretical Framework

We utilize the Family-Based Nature Activities (FBNA) framework to provide insights into how participation in outdoor family leisure may uniquely benefit children and families (Izenstark & Ebata, 2016). Within this larger term, family leisure in nature is characterized as an outdoor setting with high levels of greenness (e.g., trees) and low levels of builtness (e.g., buildings, concrete). The FBNA framework integrates Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Routines and Rituals Theory to highlight why the context of nature and continued participation in outdoor family leisure can enhance family functioning (Izenstark & Ebata, 2016). For example, ART highlights why natural environments are unique settings for fostering improved attention (Kaplan, 1995), given that these spaces provide four unique qualities: being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). When individuals' attention is restored, they are less irritable, can pick up on social cues more easily, and have more self-control (Kaplan, 1995), all characteristics that Izenstark and Ebata (2016) posited would contribute to getting along better with other family members.

Simultaneously, the Routines and Rituals Theory highlights how continued and repeated engagement in outdoor family rituals can contribute to improved family outcomes. Examples of family rituals include daily patterned interactions (i.e., leisure activities, bedtimes), traditions (i.e., family gatherings), or celebrations (i.e., holidays) and can arise in any area of family life (Bossard & Boll, 1950). It is difficult to provide a specific operational definition of a family ritual because they are unique to each family (Fiese, 2006; Fiese et al., 2002). However, family rituals are often characterized by three dimensions: communication (e.g., reflecting a meaningful and symbolic message), commitment (e.g., participation in the activity over time), and continuity (e.g., a desire to pass on the ritual) (Fiese, 2006). Several research studies have utilized the FBNA framework to study the benefits of outdoor family leisure, highlighting numerous individual and family benefits including improved attention and greater dyadic cohesion (Izenstark & Ebata, 2017), less negativity during and after an outdoor walk (Izenstark et al., 2021), and improved family communication (Izenstark & Ebata, 2022). Given the important role fathers play in children's leisure experiences (Bauer & Giles, 2018; Creighton et al., 2015; Fletcher, 2020), and due to a greater change in child-rearing responsibilities among fathers during the pandemic (Craig & Churchill, 2020), we wanted to better understand the role fathers play in their children's outdoor family rituals and how families adapted their daily routines. Taken together, the FBNA framework will provide a lens to interpret the data and better understand specific phenomena related to family leisure in the outdoors.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how children's outdoor experiences changed in both rural and urban environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the objectives were to explore: 1) general changes in shared outdoor experiences among fathers and children during daily life; and 2) the differences in rural compared to urban children's outdoor experiences.

Method

Recruitment and Participants

Fathers living in the United States who had at least one child between the ages of 5-12 years old were recruited to participate in the study. Participants were recruited through electronic flyers shared through parenting list-serves, social media sites (e.g., Facebook neighborhood groups, parks and recreation sites), and word-of-mouth. All participants in the study met the following eligibility criteria: 1) was the child's biological or adopted father; 2) had at least one child between the ages of 5-12; 3) lived in the same household with the child the majority of the time; 4) participated in outdoor recreation with their child at least once per month; and 5) could complete the interview in English. We specifically selected fathers of school-aged children because the amount of time these children spend outside is strongly influenced by the amount of time their parents spend outdoors (Larson et al., 2011). School-aged children also experienced many changes in their everyday routines during the pandemic (i.e., quarantine and the transition to online learning) (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). For the purposes of this study, "daily activities" refers to the activities and experiences that make-up their everyday, normal life.

Twenty-six fathers from both urban ($n=13$) and rural areas ($n=13$) participated in the study. All of the urban fathers lived on the west coast of the U.S., whereas the rural fathers lived in the southeast region of the country. We utilized the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Urban Influence Codes (UIC) to classify rural and urban counties based on population size and adjacency to a metropolitan area (Economic Research Service, 2013). All of the urban residents in our study lived within a county defined by having a UIC of 1 or higher (e.g., at least 1 million residents or more). All of the rural residents lived within a county with a UIC of 2. While the USDA defines a UIC of 2 as fewer than 1 million residents, it is important to note that population size ranged from 2,557 to 15,500 in the towns in which the rural participants resided.

Overall, the two groups were similar in age (urban $M=43.6$; 37-50; rural $M=40.6$; 35-46), primarily identified as middle class (urban $n=10$; rural $n=13$), and were married (24 out of 26). Participants' education levels included "some college" (urban $n=3$; rural $n=1$), earning a "bachelor's degree" (urban $n=4$), or earning a "master's degree or higher" (urban $n=6$; rural $n=12$). While both the urban and rural fathers primarily identified as Caucasian (92% rural; 84% urban), more urban fathers reported that their child was multiracial (46% urban; 0% rural). On average rural fathers reported more total children (range of 2-6; $M=3$) than urban fathers (range of 1-3; $M=2$).

Data Collection

The Institutional Review Boards of the authors' respective institutions approved this study. Data for this study was collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place over the phone or Zoom between May and August of 2020 at a convenient time for the participants. Trained interviewers with extensive experience collecting qualitative data conducted the interviews, which lasted 45-65 minutes. Following the attainment of informed verbal consent, the interviewers began the

formal interview process. Fathers received a \$25 gift card after completing the interview.

Analytic Strategy

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in combination with grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to identify themes and patterns in the data. We practiced reflexivity throughout the study through writing memos and peer discussions on our own positions (e.g., geographical location, professional work, gender, and parenting status) and how these may influence the research process. For example, we reflected and challenged assumptions based on where we currently live and how the outdoor opportunities available in our geographic area during the pandemic might influence the conclusions drawn (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Prior to data analysis, all of the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms and all transcripts were de-identified to maintain anonymity.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to conducting thematic analysis, which began with familiarizing ourselves with the data (e.g., reading transcripts, listening to interviews, and memoing coding ideas and observations). We then started the process of generating initial open codes by sorting the data by research question and coding segments of the larger interview transcript in which the participant mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic. During this process, we worked with a research assistant, who had no competing interest in the project, to help generate initial codes.

In the third phase of data analysis, we began to search for themes and moved from open coding to focused coding by analyzing the patterns and trends of the most significant and frequent codes evident. As we began to generate more themes and subthemes, we utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding paradigm to put the data back together in new ways to better understand the relationships between codes. The axial coding process helped us relate our categories to subcategories by identifying our main phenomenon (e.g., changes to outdoor recreation), and how it was impacted by causal conditions (e.g., switching to remote living), action/interaction strategies (e.g., spending more time outside), and intervening conditions (e.g., living in rural vs. urban areas). In this phase, we also utilized Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative methods to analyze similarities and differences across the urban and rural participants' interviews. From here we developed new focused codes to help us move toward developing major themes and subthemes. Code and meaning saturation was reached with the 26 fathers interviewed during this phase as no new concrete or conceptual codes were evident (Hennink et al., 2017).

This iterative process helped us move into phase four of reviewing and refining the themes. Throughout phase four and the entire analysis process, we maintained trustworthiness by checking the findings of the study against the coded extracts and full data set to ensure quality and accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while maintaining a detailed audit trail (see Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The authors and

research assistant met regularly to conceptualize the data, debrief, check interpretations, discuss agreements, and negotiate disagreements.

Finally, we moved into phases five and six and continued to further refine the themes in writing up the results section. It is important to note that we do not report the percentage of participants who reported each theme. Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that frequency of responses in qualitative research should be interpreted with caution given that they do not determine value and the absence of a response does not mean the participant did not experience a specific theme, only that the theme was not mentioned on its own.

Results

Our analysis showed that the COVID-19 pandemic forced sweeping lifestyle modifications (e.g., remote learning and work, stay-at-home orders, reduced contact with friends/family), cancellation of children's leisure programs (e.g., sports, extracurricular activities, summer camps), and local policy changes to parks/recreation activities. This in turn created changes in our participants' outdoor recreation participation patterns. We also identified differences in how local policies impacted rural versus urban children's outdoor recreation.

Changes in Outdoor Recreation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We identified two main themes that captured how both urban and rural participants' outdoor recreation behaviors changed.

Spending More Time Outdoors

Almost every participant in the study reported that they spent more time outdoors with their children indicating that during the pandemic they made "a more concerted effort to get outside together," "we get outside as a family more than we did before" and that outdoor activities together "have gone up substantially." On average, rural and urban fathers reported spending six days per week outdoors with their children during the pandemic—multiple times per day in some cases. Fathers reported having more time to spend with their children due to pandemic induced stay-at-home orders, which necessitated many changes to family schedules with online school, remote work, and cancellation of extracurricular activities. Rural Father (RF) 6 shared how his family had more availability to spend time outside (three or four times as much) since "I don't have to be at the office eight or nine hours a day." Similarly, several other fathers shared that finding time was the greatest barrier to outdoor family recreation prior to COVID-19, but during the pandemic, they had more flexibility to create their own schedules/ timelines.

For example, Urban Father (UF) 12 provided a description of his family's schedule before and during the pandemic:

It [opportunity to participate in outdoor activities] maybe has increased actually... we have more free time. We would always go outside on the weekends pre-COVID, but it's more during the week now. It's just become like an extended weekend to us in essence. We get out there more often in the middle of the day.

Developing New Outdoor Family Routines

Many fathers shared how they not only spent more time outdoors but also intentionally integrated new outdoor family routines into their daily schedules. The most commonly reported outdoor routine was regular and predictable family walks among both rural and urban participants. As one father shared, “we try to do about a walk every day in some way, shape, or form” (UF 5). Within this larger theme, we identified three subthemes regarding why fathers felt it was important to get their children outside every day to: 1) promote health and well-being, 2) fulfill increased caretaking responsibilities, and 3) encourage positive family relationships.

First, children’s health and well-being was promoted through time spent outside as it allowed them to “keep their energy and fitness levels up,” “get out of the house,” and be “away from technology.” Fathers described how getting their children outdoors was “essential to their well-being,” helped them feel a sense of normalcy, and be “healthy in their development as a whole person [physically, cognitively, emotionally].” UF 12 summarized why he made it a priority to take his children outside:

I love the outdoors. I think it's really important for kids to be outdoors, getting exercise, fresh air, understanding nature and how important it is to us. And, I just think it's overall good for your health. So I want to influence that on them and have them be outside as much as possible.

Fathers also recognized that their children were more dependent on technology as it became the primary way they participated in distance learning and connected with friends and extended family. It also served as a form of family leisure (e.g., watching movies, playing video games) and a babysitter (when parents needed to complete their own job responsibilities). RF 5 discussed how his family started taking more neighborhood walks to get away from technology:

Rather than sitting in front of electronics or the TV, we would go out for a lunch walk or an evening walk or both sometimes. So, it's definitely improved [minimized the amount of technology time]... and promotes just being outside and being kids and enjoying everything outdoors has to offer.

Second, fathers developed new outdoor family routines because they felt a greater caretaking responsibility to ensure their children got outside every day. Fathers reported the need to intentionally organize outdoor opportunities for their children to make up for the absence of outdoor time at school, in extracurricular activities and playing with friends. For example, UF 8 shared:

During the school time, I rely more on the school. Like they have their outside time at school, they have recess and I know that they're outside and they're running around, so I don't worry about it. But [now] I stress about it... like I grew up outdoors. And so I really think that's important... but now during the lockdown, I have to make sure it happens.

UF 13 described how one of the first things he did when the stay-at-home orders

began was go to a local store and “stocked up on all the backyard summer games” for his children. Similarly, RF 10 described how he put together new backyard equipment (e.g., monkey bars, trampolines, a garden, and games) so that they would have everything they needed in their own backyard. Other fathers shared how they felt a change in their role from father to playmate with the COVID-19 restrictions since their children were discouraged from interacting with peers. RF 4 explained:

...their interaction with their friends has dropped down to nearly zero. Before COVID, most days... it would have been out with friends. So my involvement has actually increased in the sense that when we're out, I'm their only playmate most of the time... I don't get to just sit by the nice creek.

Finally, fathers developed new outdoor family routines with their children as a way to encourage positive family relationships and spend more meaningful time together. This extra time allowed families to slow down and focus on one another. Previously families were “rushing from task to task” and everything had “a feeling of urgency,” but now having “the time and availability to do things has improved everything.” UF 13 explained how his view of family time changed:

COVID time actually has been kind of strange because it has been kind of nice to just be a family unit and not have the go-go-go of everyday life, which was what we considered as normal. But when you look at what normal was, normal was never being home because we were always out being involved. Whereas this has now turned it around and made us kind of like just slow things down and turn us into a family.

Several fathers shared how they would like to continue spending quality time with their family in these new outdoor family routines, even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Comparisons of Outdoor Recreation in Urban and Rural Areas

Changes in Local Policies

While both rural and urban fathers reported general outdoor recreation changes, these significantly varied based on local policies in their community. Fathers of school-aged children living in urban areas reported significantly more challenges, restrictions, and lack of access to outdoor spaces than rural fathers. Urban fathers described drastic changes to the outdoor recreation opportunities available to their children due to the closure of public recreation facilities and spaces including swimming pools, parking lots to beaches, bathroom facilities at parks, and “no tennis courts, no basketball courts, no baseball fields, no playgrounds.” They shared how it has been “enormously challenging” and “a huge, huge barrier” as the pandemic “completely upended” their typical outdoor recreation behaviors. These restrictions caused many participants to adapt by participating in activities closer to home (e.g., in the backyard or local neighborhood). Fathers shared how both the types of activities and places one could go outdoors changed due to local policies. Participation in an outdoor activity away from one’s home was challenging due to

crowded spaces, physical distancing concerns, county travel limitations, stay-at-home orders, and mask mandates. UF 3 explained “you have to find other types of activities to do at the park or outdoors when those other places are closed.” In his family, they have been bike riding instead of playing team sports. UF 5 similarly shared how the biggest change was “where we could go.” Although some county and state parks remained opened, they became increasingly crowded. UF 1 described a cascade effect of more people using fewer outdoor spaces:

You start closing one trail, everybody starts going to another trail, close that trail, and eventually it means that things get so packed that they close down. So it's been really interesting, like trying to keep up with what is actually open and where we can go and then not going if there are too many people.

In comparison, rural participants also experienced local policy changes but reported fewer restrictions. For example, rural fathers commonly shared how they had to be more creative in finding places that were open and less crowded. RF 10 explained:

So I think what changed mostly was finding the places we were allowed to go. So when the state parks opened we definitely went to the state parks. And then when they weren't, that's more when our outdoor activities were either going to the lake where my parents live or getting in the four-wheeler and going and finding some place off in the woods that there wasn't anybody.

Similarly, others described how they adapted their outdoor recreation when places further from home were closed (e.g., campgrounds, county/state parks) by finding new outdoor spaces close to home and in their community. RF 13 explained how school and store policies negatively affected them more than changes in local outdoor policies because they had access to many different neighborhood outdoor spaces, and could easily adapt if needed. For example, he described how they had access to a local park, creek, and trail system within their neighborhood, which was enough to keep their school-aged child engaged. Conversely, RF 11 shared how their outdoor recreation was impacted by self-imposed restrictions more so than local policies.

We didn't really even look into hiking [at the beginning of the outbreak]. I wasn't even really sure what the status of the forest and the parks were. I know at some point they were closed, but I didn't follow it closely because I kind of just assumed they were all pretty much shut down.... I think they were reopened for a while before we started going again, and it kind of occurred to me for the first time, like, okay, I guess you can pretty well socially distance out in the woods... So for a while, whether it was real policy or just my perceptions of what I thought policies were, we were not using those spaces and just confining to home, and later on we started to do it again.

Adaptations to Outdoor Recreation

Both rural and urban fathers described needing to make adaptations to their child's

outdoor recreation, which often resulted in participating in outdoor activities closer to home. Urban children participated primarily in walking and bike riding, whereas rural children engaged in a larger variety of outdoor activities close to home, including gardening, fishing, camping, swimming, and playing in larger yards. Additionally, rural fathers discussed the closures of forests and lakes more, whereas urban fathers discussed the closure of beaches, parks, and specific theme/amusement parks.

Fathers from both areas reported challenges associated with the cancellation of team sports. Many described how “the things that changed drastically obviously were no more team sports” and “none of the teams can meet and practice and play because of regulations.” For example, RF 2 shared how his daughter was, “full swing into two softball teams when COVID hit, and that's when everything shut down. So all of a sudden, you know, two or three days a week at the softball field turn into zero days a week.” Several fathers from both rural and urban areas expressed concern about the negative impact the abrupt cancellation of sports during spring 2020 would have on their children.

Appreciation for Outdoor Spaces

Finally, urban and rural fathers also expressed an appreciation for when trails and parks began to re-open, sharing comments such as, “Yeah, I think they actually made me appreciate those spaces a little bit more” (RF 9). Others expressed how once outdoor recreational spaces re-opened, it “caused us to be even more happy” (UF 7). RF 10 shared,

I think I just had to be more patient and understand that those local outdoor spaces are a privilege and not a right because when they're just open all of the time they start to feel like a right.... It did shift the perspective in my mind from a right to a privilege.

Discussion

Overall, the findings from this study complement and extend existing research by highlighting the importance of outdoor environments in reinforcing children's health and family relationships, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when opportunities for organized recreation and social interaction were limited. Our results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic caused sweeping lifestyle modifications and changes in outdoor recreation as well as where children learn, play, and socialize. As a result of the pandemic, participants spent more time outdoors, adapted the types of activities in which they engaged, and developed new outdoor family routines. Similar to Jackson et al. (2021), we found outdoor recreation served as an important opportunity for promoting health and well-being. The results reconfirm the health and familial benefits of outdoor recreation participation.

During a time when parents and children experienced increased stress and anxiety (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020), our findings showed that participants were able to utilize outdoor environments to exercise, get away from technology, relieve stress, and maintain some sense of normalcy. For many

families, outdoor spaces served as a refuge because they were one of the only leisure spaces available to them outside the home. Additionally, the findings highlight the versatility of outdoor recreation, as participants were able to successfully adapt their outdoor activities and still derive numerous health benefits from participation.

The findings suggest that increased father-child time together outdoors was an unanticipated benefit of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, “time” was one of the greatest barriers to outdoor family recreation (Reis et al., 2012). Pre-pandemic research showed that fathers participated in outdoor activities with their child at least once per week (Knoester & Randolph, 2019), whereas our participants reported spending an average of six days per week outside with their child. Fathers shared how this additional time together shifted the responsibility for getting their kids outside from other institutions to fathers themselves.

Fathers had to find a way to balance multiple roles during the pandemic as they took on greater caretaking roles, as well as the role of a friend. Past research has shown that the amount and way fathers spend time with their children influences fathers’ identity (Creighton et al., 2015; Marsiglio et al., 2005). For example, Creighton et al., (2015) explained how fathering is a socially constructed and consistently changing concept influenced by social, cultural, and institutional norms (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The findings in our study suggest that fathers’ identities were reshaped by their increased caretaking responsibilities. During the pandemic, fathers spent more time with their children outdoors, developed new outdoor family routines, sought out new outdoor spaces, and several even created new backyard opportunities to promote their child’s health and family relationships. The changes in everyday life brought on by the pandemic gave fathers flexibility, space, and time to reflect on their familial values and the opportunity to create, implement, and engage in valued outdoor activities with their children. Our findings corroborate existing research that shows fathers bond with and build meaningful relationships with their children through participation in leisure and recreation (Fletcher, 2020; Jenkins, 2009; Sharaievska & Hodge, 2018).

These findings can also be interpreted through the FBNA Framework (Izenstark & Ebata, 2016). While it is unknown whether families’ new outdoor routines have continued since COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, we hypothesize that many fathers will continue to promote them because they exemplified the three characteristics of a long-term ritual (communication, commitment, and continuity; Fiese, 2006). For example, in the language used to describe why they developed new outdoor family routines fathers described how it was part of their identity (i.e., “I love the outdoors” or “I grew up outdoors”), which reflected symbolic communication. They also indicated that they spent time outdoors “regularly,” “with intention,” and that it was an important part of their daily schedule. Along with these examples, fathers also reported reflecting on their lives (e.g., slowing down, focusing more on the family unit), and the desire to continue spending more quality family time in the future. Furthermore, several fathers shared how they hoped the natural environment would be important to their children in the same way it was to them as a child—reflecting continuity across generations through the desire to pass

on this value. This application of the FBNA framework complements past research on how childhood time spent in nature is associated with future participation in adulthood (Asah et al., 2012; Ward Thompson et al., 2008).

Finally, the findings emphasize the importance of access to nature. While de Lannoy et al.'s (2020) commentary discussed how neighborhood type and local policy responses to COVID-19 influenced outdoor recreation opportunities available to children in Canada, our findings complement this research by providing in-depth examples of these differences for families living in rural compared to urban areas in the U.S. For example, while public health officials were encouraging parents and children to go outside during the pandemic to promote mental and physical health, urban families experienced more restrictions and lack of access to outdoor public spaces than rural fathers. While fathers in this study only experienced temporary restrictions, it complements existing research that highlights how the neighborhood where a child lives may influence their outdoor experiences (Mitra et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. First, data was collected between May and August 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions in the U.S. were constantly changing throughout that time and thus fathers may have been impacted differently based on the time of data collection (May vs. August). To address this limitation, we asked fathers in later stages of data collection to reflect on the times when restrictions were most severe. Although COVID-19 restrictions have changed since the start of the study, the effects of the pandemic are ongoing and future studies should capture how families' outdoor recreation patterns continue to change over time. Additionally, collection of retrospective interview data assumes reliance on fathers' recollection of past events and only provides a glimpse into a family's experiences. Observational research and interviews from the child's perspective are also needed to provide a fuller picture of how families integrate outdoor routines into their daily lives.

Second, while a major strength of our study was capturing fathers' perspectives, we acknowledge that experiences of fathers across the U.S. varied significantly during the pandemic. Every father in our study worked from home during the pandemic and reported a medium to high socioeconomic status. The experiences of fathers who continued to work outside the home, became unemployed, or who did not live with their children during the pandemic may have been different, and thus should be studied. Furthermore, the majority of fathers in this study were married in a heterosexual relationship. Since past research shows that socioeconomic status, gender, and family structure discrepancies can affect fathers' ability to engage in activities with their child (Knoester & Randolph, 2019; Sharaievska & Hodge, 2018), there is a strong need to better understand the experiences of fathers of diverse backgrounds, and single, stay-at-home, and gay fathers (Bauer & Giles, 2019; Fletcher, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project demonstrated the important role outdoor spaces play in the lives of children and the entire family, especially in times of major disruptions in

everyday routines. This study contributes to existing research by providing additional information on how time spent outdoors may serve to promote child health and family relationships. These findings have policy implications and highlight the importance of communities' funding and investing in free outdoor public recreation opportunities for families, especially in urban areas as these spaces played a critical role in helping families maintain their health and well-being.

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