

Urban Children in Natural Environments: A Field Study in Sociobiology

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ABSTRACT. Six nature programs for urban children were studied from 1970 to 1974. Social networks in the camping programs and children's choices of locations for various leisure activities were examined. Return rates were found to correlate significantly with the intricacy of the social networks.

CHILDREN'S CAMPING PROGRAMS

Children from cities attend a variety of camping programs to experience the wonders of nature. In order to better understand the actual relationships between urban children and natural environments, I spent four summers observing city children at six camping programs.

The programs include: an urban nature center, a museum natural history program for inner-city children, an urban YMCA day camp, a neighborhood house camp, a scout camp, and a private charitable organization's resident camp. Major differences in the structure and organization of these programs are shown in table 1. These programs are representative of the main types available to urban children whose parents do not have the time or the inclination for family camping.

More than 40 percent of the children studied received financial aid to attend camp. The children were mainly 8 to 13 years of age at the time of the interviews. Boys and girls of all races attended all camping programs.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks can be defined as private and more or less permanent structures that bind individuals into complex lines of communication and transportation (Moreno 1934). Moreno sees

social networks as a container, or a bed that carries and mingles currents and opinions (Moreno 1960).

Social networks among urban children in natural environments take several forms. First, there are existing social networks that are moved to camp. Siblings, cousins, neighbors, or school friends at camp together constitute existing social networks. Volunteer staff who bring their children to camp form another existing social network in the camp. Second, there are clusters of returnees who have shared previous seasons of camping together. Third, there are strong attachments developed in one season, especially between children and counsellors. If adult staff interact face to face with children, favorite children may be invited back for a second year.

Children's Social Networks and Leisure Preferences

Social networks are associated with children's leisure preferences. In individual interviews, 363 children were asked what they do in particular places when they can do what they like to do (Allen 1977). The leisure locales given were: home, yard, school, neighborhood, in town (parks, museums and beaches) and out of town (special vacation places and trips to visit relatives). Children were also asked about their companions for each reported activity. These companions are the ingredients of social networks.

Table 1.—Major characteristics of six camping and conservation programs for urban children

Sponsor	Type of program	Return rate	Year established	Size of site	Distance children travel	Average length of visit	Primary season	Sex of director (s)
		<i>Percent</i>		<i>Acres</i>	<i>Miles</i>	<i>Weeks</i>		
Public city park nature program	Specialized conservation	32	1947	46	0-5	Variable (0-8 hr)	Fall, winter, spring	M
Private university museum summer program	Specialized conservation	6	1968	1-50	0-5	3 (half day)	Summer	F
Public charitable day camp (YMCA/YWCA)	Centralized camping	22	1948	72	0-25	2	Summer	F,M
Private neighborhood house day camp	Centralized camping	35	1952	70	0-25	2	Summer	M
Public scout resident camp	Decentralized camping	27	1912	7-1100	5-100	2	Summer, winter	F,M
Private charitable resident camp	Decentralized camping	29	1887	1000	5-100	4	Summer, winter	F

Variations in leisure preferences by locale are shown in table 2. The 10 leisure categories are a synthesis of 6,463 separate responses and over 630 reported leisure activities. The categories of competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo are from a classification of games by Caillois (1961). *Nature* includes fishing, hiking, camping, gardening and activities with pets. *Competition* encompasses baseball, football, basketball, and street games like hockey, handball, stickball, and tag. *Simulation* refers to pretending games such as dolls, house, doctor, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, and store. *Chance* includes cards, bingo, and commercial board

games. *Vertigo* means games which stimulate or upset the centers of balance, such as, running, jumping, bicycling, swimming, climbing, and swinging. *Travel* means sightseeing and trips to shop, vacation, or visit relatives. *Construction* includes creative activities like sewing, painting, building models and commercial craft kits, coloring, and drawing. *Quiet* encompasses solitary and sedentary endeavors such as reading, talking on the telephone, listening to music, eating, and watching television. *Work* refers to domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, running errands, and helping with younger children in the family. *Negative* includes teasing

Table 2.—Locations preferred by campers for various types of leisure activities, in percent of respondents

Type of activity	Location					
	Home	Yard	Neighborhood	School	In town	Out of town
Nature	3	12	5	1	7	11
Competition	6	61	37	45	13	4
Simulation	13	4	5	3	0	0
Chance	22	1	3	5	1	0
Vertigo	2	16	29	16	26	16
Travel	0	1	11	2	48	64
Constructive	12	1	2	9	2	1
Quiet	37	2	4	10	1	2
Work	4	1	2	6	1	1
Negative	1	1	2	2	1	1

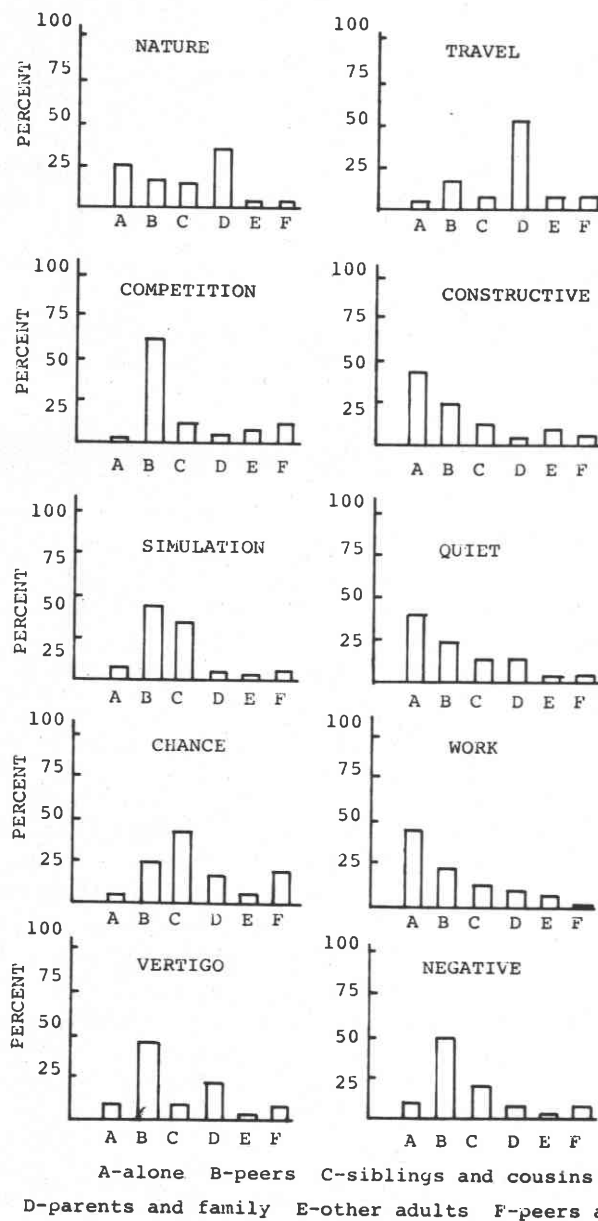
people, fighting, getting into trouble, and aimless activities like "hanging around" or "fooling around."

Note that nature-related activities occupy a small portion of children's reported leisure, even though the children were attending a nature-oriented outdoor program at the time of the interview. The children reside mainly in cities like New York and New Haven, and the constraints

and orientations of an urban lifestyle are reflected in their reports of leisure preferences. Competitive street games are the dominant activities.

Companions most often chosen for each category of leisure activity are given in figure 1. Competition, stimulation, chance, and negative activities are most often carried out with peers or siblings and cousins

Figure 1.—Companions most often chosen for each category of leisure activity (in percent).



and travel are more frequently with adult family members. Constructive, quiet, or work activities are often solitary endeavors.

Return Rates and Social Networks

A careful analysis of attendance records shows several things about social networks, children, and nature. Return rates can be derived by comparing names and addresses on attendance lists for consecutive years. For the six programs examined in 1972 and 1973, return rates varied from 6 percent to 35 percent. The lower figure is for a program that does not recruit in the same schools in consecutive years. The higher figure is more typical of cohesive neighborhood programs.

The nature experiences returnees and newcomers have in camp differ. Returnees have special knowledge of past events and camp lore. They know about natural features and ritual ceremonies. They lend stability and continuity. The slow replacement of group members provides a sense of belonging to a community that is recognizable year after year. In subtle ways, returnees contribute to the persistence of programs and social networks.

Social networks, in turn, influence recruitment patterns, the program's reputation with children, and the degree of cohesiveness among past staff and former campers. When these adult returnees are present they serve important functions. They orient newcomers, provide volunteer labor, donate money and material goods in times of scarcity, and generally foster the altruistic sentiments of the group.

The Significance of Social Networks in Children's Camps

This subtle role of nature in the lives of urban children has to be seen in the context of existing social networks. Too frequently, program managers think only in terms of the number of children served. In today's society, a filling-station ethic prevails. Children are bused to camp for their measured portion of nature recreation, as if to a spiritual tuneup.

Too little attention is paid to return rates and patterns of existing social networks in camps. Only one camp director routinely calculated return rates.

The physical isolation of most camp settings fosters a special feeling of community cohesion.

The fixed location of the camp property is also important for the maintenance of social networks and group cohesion.

There is a sense of symbolic ownership of the land and the land-water interface among the people who return to children's camps. This group of people would ordinarily not control this resource of the more affluent. Four of the programs I studied have access to land they do not actually own; its use is made possible by donations from wealthy patrons.

LOOKING AHEAD

Suburban development is common on the fringes of all the programs. The wildness is largely symbolic. Camps face a number of serious problems: rising costs and strict health and safety standards that favor day and half-day programs over longer visits to natural environments. There is also a significant drop in the birth rate, which is already being felt in the larger organized programs. The professionalization of everyone and the increased participation of women in the labor force are changing the patterns of available volunteers.

The practice of busing children away from city neighborhoods ignores the more difficult task of making the places where poorer children live fit for growing children. Too often children have little time to get lost in fantasy play or explore nature because the behavior norms of school are fostered in camp.

Nevertheless, camps for urban children will probably continue to provide low-cost vacations in natural settings. The challenge to managers is to provide urban children with variety, accessibility, and extensions of existing social networks.

The challenge to researchers is to see beyond myths and assumptions to what is actually happening to urban children in natural environments. A new synthesis of theory and methods of sociobiology (*Wilson 1975*) provides many clues for uncovering patterns of behavior in naturalistic settings. Social networks, kin groups, and face-to-face interactions observed at camp can be better understood in sociobiological terms.

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