

Discussion Topic

Importance of the Outdoors in the Girl Scout Leadership Experience

The outdoor experience has been core to Girl Scouting since its beginning in 1912. Recently, members have voiced significant renewed interest in considering what role the outdoors plays in the Girl Scout experience today. As such, the National Board has included the topic “Importance of the Outdoors in the Girl Scout Leadership Experience” on the agenda.

This conversation will be grounded in the Girl Scout Research Institute’s newly released *More than S’Mores: Successes and Surprises in Girl Scouts’ Outdoor Experience* as well as in industry-wide research. Key findings about girls and the outdoors in Girl Scouts are:

- Girl Scouts helps girls get outdoors. Ninety-seven percent of girls said that they had done at least one outdoor activity in Girl Scouts and 76 percent of respondents said they had been camping.
- Girls really enjoy outdoor activities in Girl Scouts—nearly two-thirds (62 percent) said so in the study.
- Monthly exposure, high adventure, and repeat camp attendance are key drivers of girls’ leadership and satisfaction. Girls reported particular strengths as opportunities to pursue challenge seeking and problem solving, with multiple exposures.
- Different groups of girls report different outdoor experiences and outcomes. Both Hispanic and African American girls were more likely than their peers to say they overcame a fear of the outdoors through Girl Scouts. Additionally, girls with low self-esteem were more likely to say that through Girl Scouts they did outdoor activities that they could not have otherwise done.
- Girl Scouts helps girls connect with and care for the environment. When compared to the general population of girls, Girl Scouts reported much higher commitment to environmental stewardship.
- Camping experiences create memories and build leadership. Camping is the most memorable experience reported by girls who had been camping sometime during their Girl Scout experience, and is one of the top experiences reported by Girl Scout alumnae.

This study provides evidence that Girl Scouts remains an organization that provides girls with numerous, impactful, and memorable experiences in the outdoors—and is about much more than just s’mores.

Results of a 2005 American Institute for Research Study for the California Department of Education—which measured the impact of single, weeklong residential outdoor education programs—showed that exposure to nature benefits children academically as well as physically.¹ Students who experienced a weeklong program had a 27 percent increase in measured mastery of science concepts, enhanced cooperation and conflict resolution skills, gains in self-esteem, positive environmental behavior and problem solving, increased motivation to learn, and improved classroom behavior.

An *American Journal of Public Health* researcher found that exposure to natural settings helped reduce the symptoms of ADHD in children.² Similarly, environmental psychologists Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan have demonstrated that contact with nature restores attention and promotes recovery from mental fatigue and restoration of mental focus.



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A University of Illinois study found that the positive influence of near-home nature on the ability to concentrate may be more pronounced for girls ages six to nine than on boys.⁴ On average, the greener a girl's view from home, the better she concentrates, the less she acts impulsively, and the longer she can delay gratification. This helps her do better in school, handle peer pressure, and avoid dangerous, unhealthy, or problem behaviors. Based on this study, the University of Illinois issued this informal advice regarding girls to parents, caregivers, and others:

- Encourage girls to study or play in rooms with a view of nature.
- Encourage children to play outdoors in green spaces, and advocate for recess in green schoolyards.
- Plant and care for trees and vegetation at your residence, or encourage the owner to do so.
- Value and care for the trees in your community. Caring for trees means caring for people.

With renewed interest in the important role of the out-of-doors in the educational and social development of youth, help us consider how our Girl Scout Leadership Experience—including the three Girl Scout processes of girl led, learning by doing, and cooperative learning—can be applied to the outdoor experience. Come to the Girl Scout National Council Session/53rd Convention ready to discuss how, for the benefit of girls today and into the future, our organization can take a leadership role in outdoor learning.

¹ American Institute of Research, "Study Shows Benefit of Outdoor Environmental Programs for Sixth Grade Students," June 2005.

² Frances E. Kuo and Andrea Faber Taylor. "A Potential Natural Treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Evidence From a National Study." *American Journal of Public Health*: September 2004, Vol. 94, No. 9, pp. 1580–1586.

³ Kaplan, R.; Kaplan, S. (1989). *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-34139-6.

⁴ Faber Taylor, A., Kuo, F.E., & Sullivan, W.C. (2002). "Views of Nature and Self-Discipline: Evidence from Inner City Children." *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 22, 49–63.

Elections

The National Council will elect the officers and members-at-large of the National Board of Directors and the members of the National Board Development Committee. (See pages 9–32.)