

This tool kit offers best practices for connecting more youth with the outdoors and presents strategies that SLVGO Coalition, communities and organizations can employ to inspire and facilitate more frequent participation in outdoor recreation among SLV residents under the age of 25.

## Understanding Motivations and Barriers to Participation in Outdoor Activities among Youth

Adopted from The Outdoor Foundation's *Special Report on Youth, The Next Generation of Outdoor Champions*, the following overview provides helpful information for understanding what gets youth outdoors, who introduces youth to the outdoors and what keeps youth from getting outdoors. This background information is intended to guide those interested in recruiting new outdoor recreation participants and converting casual and occasional recreationalists into enthusiasts.

### **Influencers.** *Who influences youth to participate in outdoor recreation?*

Parents, friends and family are the most influential among youth outdoor participants. As youth age, the influence of friends and the interests of youth themselves begin to overshadow the influence of parents, brothers, sisters and relatives.

### **Motivations.** *What motivates youth to participate in outdoor recreation?*

For youth ages 6 to 17, the top motivator is fun. For youth ages 18 to 24, relaxation and exercise become the top motivations.

### **Barriers.** *What keeps youth participants from getting outdoors more?*

For all ages, a lack of time and interest keeps youthful recreationalists from getting outdoors more often. Males ages 6 to 17 express a preference for TV, video games and computers significantly more than females of the same age.

### **Barriers.** *What keeps non-participants in outdoor recreation from getting out?*

Among youth ages 6 to 17 who are not accustomed to recreating outdoors, a lack of interest is the top reason for staying indoors. Among ages 18 to 24, a lack of time is the top reason. Non-participants demonstrate the biggest disparities between the motivations of males and females. Among other differences, non-participant females ages 6 to 17 cite schoolwork and a preference for time with

friends as barriers more often. Males ages 13 to 17 cite a preference for TV, video games and computers more often.

## Best Practices for Connecting Youth with the Outdoors & Recreation

### **Make Sure Parents Know Where to Find Family Friendly Outdoor Spaces.**

Sometimes parents just don't know where the fun, safe parks and open spaces are. Create a list and/or map that promotes "family friendly" outdoor spaces in communities or across the SLV. Incorporate this list onto SLVGO.com and encourage parents to share new spots that they discover and enjoy with their kids.

- Build list(s) of environmental education and outdoor skills instruction (e.g., clinics, camps, lessons)
- Identify entry-level or beginner areas for outdoor recreation where youth and their families can build their skills. (e.g. easy climbing routes or smooth, beginner friendly mountain bike trails)
- Package and promote these family friendly outdoor spaces in a fun way for parents and kids.

### **Promote Existing SLV Programs Already Available for Youth.**

Many of the federal and state land management agencies (e.g., NPS, USFS, BLM, CPW) have "connect to nature" programs tailored for youth. Work with these agency partners and help the agencies spread the word about these programs with links on SLVGO.com and other community information outlets. Also build list(s) of environmental education opportunities run by SLV nonprofits and outdoor skills instruction (e.g., clinics, camps, lessons) and make this information available to parents.

### **Enliven & Improve Existing Outdoor Spaces for Youth.**

Often times small, inexpensive improvements can make a park or outdoor space more attractive to families.

- Use natural features such as boulders or large cottonwood rounds to build "wild zone playscapes" or "nature play areas" where children can climb and play.
- Use paint to spruce up a playground and encourage activity with bright colors
- Use paint or chalk spray paint (which is temporary) to create games such as four square and twister.

- Improve surfacing around play grounds. Make it softer with safety surfacing or mulch.

### **Ditch some of the Rules and Allow for “Free Form” Nature Play.**

In existing parks, managers could designate formerly “off trail” areas as nature play zones and provide lists of things for youth to do in these zones (e.g., collect 5 pine cones, smell the ponderosa pine bark, make a twig sculpture). Allow children the freedom to climb trees, pick berries, play in the mud, build rock sculptures and collect bugs in these “nature zones”.

### **Re-introduce Nature.**

Sometimes interventions are necessary to introduce or re-introduce youth to the outdoors and to encourage outdoor play and overcome the problems of sedentary behavior. These interventions could include guided tours; orienteering courses, geo-caching and scavenger hunts to encourage exploration; and even outdoor clothing lessons (to enable outdoor play in poor weather). Communities could also sponsor nature exploration clubs and/or employ naturalists (or train volunteer naturalists) to lead activities with families.

### **Retro Fit Green Spaces and Parks to Incorporate Nature Play Facilities**

Nature play features are elements that invite youth to play, explore, climb and they are typically built from natural features such as logs, boulders, stumps and twigs. These nature play features are appealing to youth; allow for fun, unstructured play; and serve as a introduction to outdoor recreation on public lands and in natural areas.

### **Engage youth in the design or revitalization of existing park/outdoor spaces.**

Oftentimes kids know exactly what they want in their local playground. By engaging them in the design, a community can better meet local youth’s needs and build additional interest in a park.

### **Schools Out – Let the Community Play.**

Open school yards to the public when school is out in the afternoons and in the summer time. Communities should work with school districts to establish agreements that allow for shared uses of a school’s recreation facilities after hours.

### **Create Discovery Activities Tailored For Youth.**

A simple scavenger hunt or other type of discovery game can be enough to lure youth and families outdoors. Identify a set of clues or activities (e.g. take a picture of yourself here, do 5 jumping jacks at X trail intersection) youth can find or do in existing family friendly outdoors spaces. Use the activity to encourage exploration of more than one outdoor or recreation area. To encourage participation, work with partners to promote the activity and to offer incentives that would appeal to youth such as gear, stickers, or movie tickets.

### **Make sure Recreation Events and Races have Youth Categories.**

If your community hosts a race of some sort, be sure to include at least one youth category so children can participate too. Consider waiving the race fee for the youth categories. Opening recreation events and races to youth will encourage more participation by families, build the number of spectators, nurture a culture of recreation and, hopefully, turn some youth on to competitive outdoor recreation.

### **Bring in the Sports Idols. Work with partners to bring in sports idols to events.**

An opportunity to see and high five a professional or sponsored athlete is inspiring for youth and may encourage them to dedicate themselves to their own recreation interests. Cross country runners from the Adams State or professional Colorado climbers, mountain bikers, tri-athletes, skiers/ snowboarders, and other athletes competing in the region could be recruited for appearances.

### **Mentor Program.**

A mentor program is a great way to build outdoor recreation among youth. Mentors could take groups of youth out on trips and/or work individually with a youth to teach them about a particular outdoor pursuit. Communities could approach local outdoor clubs to see if they’d be interested in offering mentoring to area youth.

**Borrow Ideas from National Organizations Engaged in Connecting Youth and the Outdoors.**

National organizations have developed many activities and programs designed to get youth moving and outdoors. Many of these organizations have newsletters where they regularly share new tips and ideas for engaging youth as well as online activity finders that offer ideas for parents and others trying to motivate kids to enjoy the outdoors. SLV communities, local organizations and parents can draw inspiration from these organizations and adopt their strategies. Some exemplary national programs include:

- Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" [www.letsmove.org](http://www.letsmove.org)
- The Nature Conservancy's "Nature Rocks" [www.nature.org/naturerocks](http://www.nature.org/naturerocks)

- Fire Up Your Feet, <http://fireupyourfeet.org/>, A Safe Routes to School National Partnership with Kaiser Permanente
- The National Wildlife Federation's "Be Out There" movement <http://www.nwf.org/Be-Out-There.aspx>
- Arbor Day Foundation's "Nature Explore" project <http://www.arborday.org/explore/families/>
- Children and nature Network <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>



Summit of Teijaras Peak (courtesy of Adams State Adventure Programs)

## LIST OF NATURE PLAY FEATURES DESIGNED TO ATTRACT YOUTH AND ENCOURAGE OUTDOOR PLAY

Consider enhancing existing parks, trail systems and open spaces with nature play features. Choose a selection from the following, relatively low cost and simple nature play features:

- Log balance beams
- Willow domes and dens
- Dirt digging zones
- Forts
- Fallen trees
- Hollowed-out play log / tunnel
- Streams, ditches, diversions, pools, muddy pits (for shallow water play)
- River rock gardens (for building rock sculptures, cairns, etc)
- Upright logs (vertical posts set into the ground)
- Timber post maze
- Mounds and hollows
- Stepping stones and stepping logs
- Boulder climbers
- Hiding places and sneaky views
- Cone pool (a large area of pine cones to play in)
- Long grass and wild flowers (unmowed, natural areas)

Prices for these types of nature play features will vary depending on materials costs and engineering required to stabilize and secure structures. Most of these features can be designed and built for under \$2,000.

## CASE STUDIES: Connecting Youth With the Outdoors



Opened in 2009, Saratoga Springs, NY's "Forest Kindergarten" occupies a 325-acre side within a state park. Students (ages 3 ½ - 6) spend the first half of the day outside and then go inside for formal lessons in a farmhouse on the property or in the main school house building nearby. Outdoor kindergartens are rare in the United States, but are common in several European countries.



Spray chalk and bright paint can liven up an outdoor space and make it more appealing to youth. Twister Paint!



Low cost, nature play elements can often make a park or nature area more appealing to kids and their families.



Fit 2 Play Miami offer maps and activities lists for parents and camps and badges for children to collect.



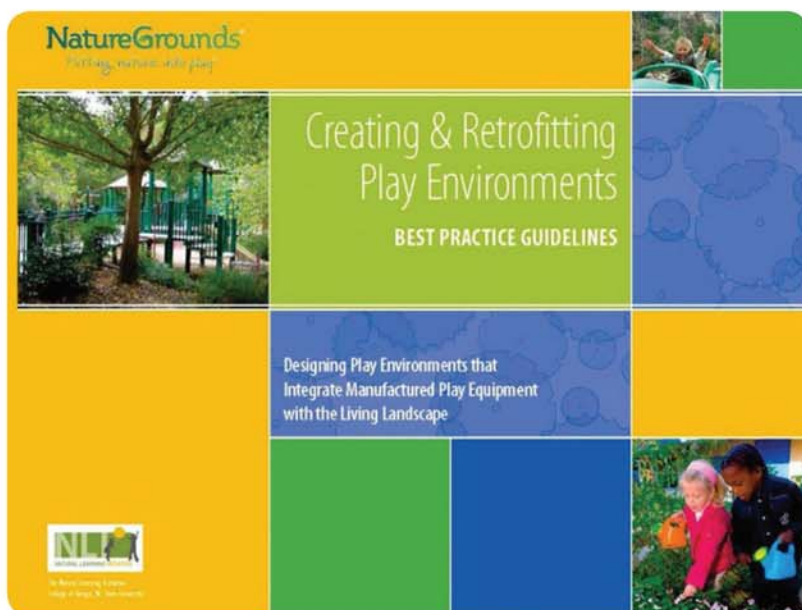
Bike park elements are increasingly popular in communities. Features like this pump track in Ventura, CA invite outdoor recreation for all ages.



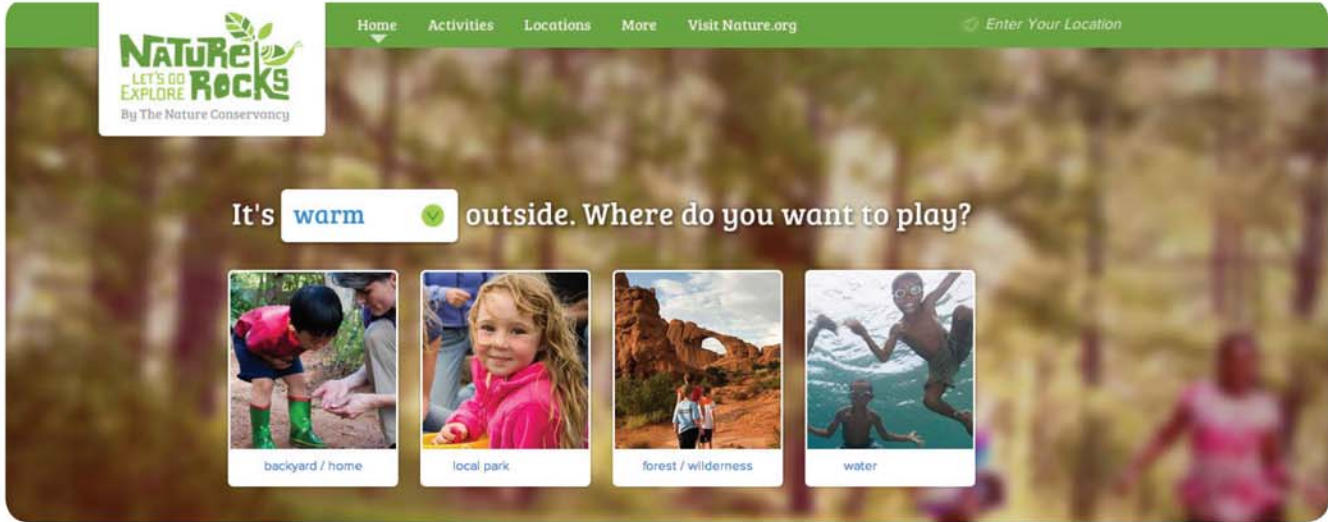
Moors Valley, a park in England with a wide collection of features and activities for youth and their families. <http://www.moors-valley.co.uk>



Nature play elements (dig area, wildflower plantings and a tree house) at Denver Botanic Gardens facilities.



PlayCore, Inc., a manufacturer of commercial play equipment has partnered with the Natural Learning Initiative to form the NatureGrounds program. The team has published a 48-page guidebook entitled “Creating & Retrofitting Play Environments: Best Practice Guidelines,” that is intended for use in parks and schools. The guidebook is available free of charge from the NatureGrounds website.



TNC's [www.nature.org/naturerocks](http://www.nature.org/naturerocks) - is great online resource for partners. It includes an Activity Finder with simple, fun and creative ways for kids and families to explore in nature. Parents can filter ideas by age, location and even weather.

# Nature Treasure Hunt



brought to you by The Nature Conservancy

For Pebbles  
(Suggested for 4 to 7 year olds)

What treasures can you find in nature? With this guide, go outside and see how you can explore the wonders of nature. Do this easy treasure hunt in your own backyard, in a nearby park, a nature preserve ... wherever you like to be in the great outdoors! Find the objects and do the activities in order or mix it up! A clipboard and a pencil are handy for this treasure hunt. Have fun!

- 1. Find something round.
- 2. Jump like a frog, growl like a bear and flap your wings like a bird.
- 3. What's the smoothest thing you can find?
- 4. Discover evidence that an animal has been here.
- 5. Find something that smells good ... or bad!
- 6. Listen for a bird. What else can you hear?
- 7. Find a place where an animal would be happy.
- 8. How many different colors can you find?
- 9. Find something that moves.
- 10. Dig into the ground with your hands or flip over a rock or log. What can you find? Don't forget to put it back!



Once your family is done with the Nature Treasure Hunt, let us know how it went. Share your tips and experiences online at [nature.org/treasurehunt](http://nature.org/treasurehunt).



Nature Rocks is a program of The Nature Conservancy, in partnership with Children and Nature Network, to inspire and empower families to play and explore in nature for happier, healthier and smarter children.

[NatureRocks.org](http://NatureRocks.org)



Set clear expectations for youth and family trail users with signs and trail information (Hartman Rocks, Gunnison, CO).