

Needing Trees

The Nature of Happiness

2015 National Tree Day Report Key Findings

The *Needing Trees – The Nature of Happiness* report, commissioned by Planet Ark and sponsored by Toyota, investigates how contact with nature makes people happy across all life stages.

The report found that spending time in nature influences our subjective wellbeing, which has long-term health and financial consequences for Australians in light of our significantly reduced time in nature over the past generation. With today's children spending more time inside and on screens than ever, we may be setting them up to become "the unhappy generation".

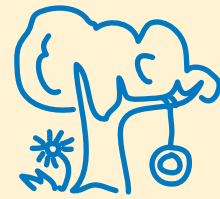


Nature's happiness factor



People who regularly engage in activities outdoors are significantly happier than people who do not – just one third more outdoor time makes a critical difference.

Nine out of 10 people say that nature makes them feel happy and relaxed.



People who rated themselves as happier adults than their peers had engaged in one third more activities outside each week as children (31%).

Nature improves social skills - people with a strong connection to nature are 17% more likely to have at least five close friends in their lives.



*nature + family
+ nutrition + exercise
= happy child*

Carers list time in nature, along with strong family and social networks, sleep, diet and exercise, as essential pillars to creating inspiration and imagination and increased relaxation and calm in children. These are all important factors in creating happiness.

The 2015 UN World Happiness report ranked Australia as the 10th happiest country out of 135, yet the category in which Australians said they were least satisfied was their work-life balance. Despite Australia being known as 'an outdoor nation' Australians now spend on average over 90% of their time indoors.



Stress

While time spent outside in nature has been decreasing, there has been a rapid increase in levels of stress and depression, with depression-associated disability costing the Australian economy \$14.9 billion a year.

1 in 4

young Australians are unhappy with their lives. Studies have linked this with changes in behaviour due to technological advancements, such as increasing screen time and the use of social media, suggesting that technology is driving us inside.



Residential areas with more green spaces and trees have greater social networks and senses of community factors that correlate to happiness and wellbeing, especially for an ageing population.

One study showed that 97% of adults described an outdoor area when asked to remember their favourite place during childhood.



Three out of four adults played outdoors more often than indoors when they were young, compared to only one in ten children today.



Happy office workers spend 34% more time in nature than their unhappier colleagues.



Your brain on nature – why it makes us happy

- Spending time in nature has the ability to influence a person's happiness because it has direct effects on the brain and hormone secretion.
- Viewing nature activates areas of the brain linked with the dopamine reward system, triggering happiness-induced recall and feelings of wellness, whereas viewing urban scenes activates areas of the brain associated with anxiety, fear and unpleasantness.
- Viewing natural environments produces more alpha wave activity compared to viewing urban environments – brain activity that has been shown to be greater in creative individuals.
- Nature reduces the body's response to stress, with cortisol secretion and irregularity decreasing with the more green space a person is exposed to.
- The biophilia hypothesis states that because of our origins we are innately connected to nature, with activities that enhance our engagement with the natural world receiving neurological and biochemical positive feedback.
- Exposing children to environments that reduce stress and increase wellbeing has long-term effects on the structure of the brain and happiness later in life.
- Changes in technology, including easier, faster and personalised access to television, the Internet and computer games is contributing to changes in behaviour, with research showing these activities activate areas of the brain linked with addiction.



More about the *Needing Trees – The Nature of Happiness* Report

The above results are a snapshot of the *Needing Trees – The Nature of Happiness* report, which discusses the long-term implications for today's children that reduced contact with nature during childhood can have on future happiness and wellbeing. The report also reviews Australian and international studies that examine the influence of nature on a person's emotional wellbeing and the short and long-term physiological changes this causes to the brain.

Both the independent Planet Ark survey conducted by research experts Pollinate and the National Tree Day survey conducted by Planet Ark that were included in the report used the nature relatedness scale (NRS) and subjective happiness scale (SHS) to measure the happiness and connection to nature of participants. Participants were allocated a score for each based on their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements like 'I always think about how my actions affect the environment' and 'I take notice of wildlife wherever I am' for the NRS, and 'In general I consider myself a very happy person' and 'Compared to most of my peers I consider myself more happy' for the SHS.' These scales have been used and referenced in over 1,000 peer-reviewed journals.

Second to being healthy, happiness is arguably the most important trait that parents want for their children. These results show that the amount of time children spend outside influences how happy they will be as adults. Yet three out of four adults played outdoors more often than indoors when they were young, compared to only one in ten children today.

Planet Ark's past research, combined with this year's findings that nature time generates happiness, suggests that Australian children are on track to grow into an unhappy generation disconnected from nature and living an indoor lifestyle.

How nature care activities like National Tree Day help

Incorporating time in nature into the lives of Australian families NOW is likely to be able to reduce or even stop our current path to creating the unhappy generation.

Time in nature is a free and easy way to increase happiness and wellbeing in Australia, helping to reduce the economic burden of mental illness and create a better future for the next generation of Australians.

Planet Ark is encouraging everyone to incorporate more green into their offices, homes and schools and participate in a National Tree Day activity in their workplace, home or community to take steps for their own health and inspire others.

After all, the National Tree Day survey found that participants are on average 15% happier than the general Australian population.

For more information and to find your nearest Tree Day site, please visit treeday.planetark.org or call the National Tree Day Hotline on 1300 88 5000.

For more information on Planet Ark's previous nature-related research, please visit:

TreeDay.PlanetArk.org/research

