



# Natural medicine: Urban families explore benefits of the outdoors



Erin Allday | April 10, 2017



Marco David, 8, left, and Marietou Keita, 7 fish on the docks at Lake Chabot in Castro Valley, Calif. Saturday, April 1, 2017. Kids and families at UCSF Children's Hospital in Oakland are getting a nature prescription as part of a program to encourage kids to go outside to improve their health. Photo: Mason Trinca, Special to The Chronicle

On one of the first hot Saturdays of the year, a crowd of families gathered around Dr. Nooshin Razani near Lake Chabot.

They were wilting a bit under the afternoon sun, some gazing longingly at the water, just visible through the trees. That lake, Razani told them, was healing them.

Within minutes of being in nature, their blood pressure lowered, she said; their stress melted away; their breathing slowed and deepened. Razani paused, taking a deep breath of her own.

“Let the lake do its work,” she said.

Fifty people had come on a field trip to the lake in Castro Valley. They were single moms and dads, babies in strollers and eye-rolling teenagers, grandmothers and grandfathers. They were families of refugees, and families with roots going back generations in the East Bay. For most, it was their first time at Lake Chabot.

Their visit was part of a growing national appreciation of nature as medicine, and a trend toward developing programs that make it easier for people to be outside.

Every month, Razani — a pediatrician at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland — escorts families she knows through her practice to a different East Bay regional park. They have only one goal: to be in nature. They may learn something, they may get some exercise and vitamin D, but their assignment is to just be.

“From cradle to grave, there is compelling evidence that human beings need to be in natural settings,” said Razani. “We just need to let nature do its own work.”



Kids and families fish along the docks at Lake Chabot in Castro Valley, Calif. Saturday, April 1, 2017 as part of a program at UCSF Children's Hospital in Oakland to encourage kids to go outside to improve their health. Photo: Mason Trinca, Special to The Chronicle

Razani’s program, a collaboration with the East Bay Regional Park District called Stay Healthy in Nature Every day, or SHINE, is open to patients at Children’s Hospital Oakland. There are similar events in San Francisco, where anyone can attend free walks at Golden Gate Park and other sites on Saturdays, and at parks all over the Bay Area.

Six years ago, several agencies came together to form the Healthy Parks Healthy People initiative, which promotes free outdoor activities, many targeting communities that don’t often access natural settings. On April 23, many regional parks will be holding “park prescription” day events to introduce people to the concept of nature as medicine.

Public health and outdoor enthusiasts have long understood that convening with nature is good for physical and mental well-being, but exactly how and why isn’t always clear.

Rigorous clinical research is slim. But studies have found that time in nature can help with stress, depression, cognitive function, physical strength and coordination. Some research suggests that different kinds of nature — from grassy neighborhood parks to Sierra forestland — deliver different benefits.

It's not just that people tend to get more exercise outside or that the air quality is better, though those factors play a role. One study showed that running on a trail through a forest has more health benefits than running on a treadmill or even outside in a city. In another small study, children with attention deficit disorder were able to concentrate better after a walk through a park compared to a walk around their neighborhood.

There's something particular to nature — the wildness of it, the freedom and awe it provokes — that seems to uniquely affect human health, Razani said. But no one knows what kind of nature is best, or how much, and that makes it difficult to prescribe. Nature's effect can't be bottled or put into a pill.

"I want to be able to talk about milligrams of nature," Razani said. "It's a little silly to try to quantify it that way. But we need instructions on how to make use of these things that everyone should have."

Even if doctors prescribe nature to their patients, following through is not as simple as it sounds. Many people have no easy access to even a neighborhood park, much less a wide expanse of nature, say public health and park advocates.



Richard Seward and stepdaughter Ceanarionn Smith Woods, 4, look over a bird identification card as they boat on Lake Chabot in Castro Valley. Photo: Mason Trinca, Special to The Chronicle

If it takes a long Muni Metro ride to get from San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood to Golden Gate Park, people who rely on public transit may not have the time — or motivation — to get there. They could go to McLaren Park, which is more convenient, but maybe they've heard about crime there and don't feel safe.

Or maybe they're just not comfortable in the outdoors. They may think they have the wrong clothes or shoes, or that they won't know what to do or where to go. If most of the users of the big regional, state or national parks are middle-class people with North Face gear and \$100 hiking poles, a recent immigrant who shows up in jeans and sandals with a plastic bottle of water in hand may feel out of place — and unwelcome.

“It can make it seem in some way like a country club more than open lands,” said Dr. Curtis Chan, deputy health officer with the San Francisco Department of Public Health. “Open spaces are for everyone. And the communities that are poor — they don’t have a small neighborhood park, they don’t have their own large backyard, they might have a chronic disease — they actually need these spaces the most.”

Lisa McHenry with San Francisco Recreation and Park said part of her goal when she leads walks at Golden Gate Park is just to get people comfortable. The park belongs to them, she points out.

“It can be intimidating to go someplace that you’ve never been before, even parks,” McHenry said. “To get out and explore, that takes courage. It’s great to have someone who can introduce them to the park and answer their questions and make them feel better.”

Razani wants her families to relax and feel safe in nature, but also to seek out the moments of awe that make the blood rush — spotting a deer among the trees, or a hill overcome with California poppies.

Aside from wanting to link her patients with nature, Razani hopes to use her park trips as a sort of lab.

Two years ago, she created a clinical trial in which some patients and their families were simply handed brochures for regional parks and encouraged to go outside, while others were invited on three field trips. She followed up with the patients and families to see whether there were differences in their physical and mental health, and plans to publish the results this year.

This month’s trip to Lake Chabot was an extension of that trial.

It was 2-year-old Ehjasi’s first time in “real nature,” said his mom, Rhyan Hodge. She grew up hiking and camping with her family, so it nags at Hodge that her son rarely goes outside. But their neighborhood in Concord isn’t safe for him, she said, and she’s too busy most other times to drive him to a park.

“I’d be happy just to have him run around, get some fresh air — real oxygen,” Hodge said.

Down by the lake, Janice Henry of Oakland stood on a dock, eye on her two daughters while they dangled fishing poles over the choppy water.

Henry isn’t much of an outdoor enthusiast — on two trips to Yosemite, she wasn’t happy sleeping in a tent cabin and having to venture out of it every time she wanted to use the bathroom — but she appreciates the value of nature, especially for her children.

And on this perfect spring day, she soaked up the excitement of the families around her. Aleczandrea, 9, in particular was having a good day: For reasons that she has never explained to her mom, the girl had always wanted to go fishing. Finally, she got her chance.

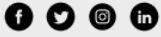
Standing on the dock, pole clutched in both hands, Aleczandrea said she wanted to catch a salmon or a cod or a catfish for dinner. Told there were only trout in the lake, she said that was fine, too. And what if she didn’t catch anything at all?

“I’d be happy that I at least got my dream,” Aleczandrea said, serious, eyes on the lake.

She’d catch their dinner next time, she said.

Erin Allday is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: [eallday@sfchronicle.com](mailto:eallday@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@erinallday](https://twitter.com/erinallday)





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