



Health, Conservation, Youth-Serving Groups To Surgeon General: Make Outdoor Time A Health Priority

*National Wildlife Federation, 214 Groups, and 16,300 Citizens
Support Benefits of Time Outside and Unstructured Outdoor Play*

WASHINGTON (February 3, 2010) – National Wildlife Federation (NWF), more than 200 health, conservation, youth, and other organizations, and 16,300 Americans are urging the new surgeon general to make time outdoors a health priority for children.

The new citizen's petition and letter of support to Dr. Regina Benjamin recommend a "Call to Action" to promote the health benefits of children who engage in regular unstructured outdoor play in their backyards, at local parks, or any green space that offers the opportunity to connect with nature.

Dr. Benjamin last week joined First Lady Michelle Obama and U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to announce plans for a healthier America through regular physical activity and better nutrition. Time unplugged and in nature should be an integral part of the vision.

Rebecca Garland, Executive Director of NWF's Be Out There campaign, said today:

"National Wildlife Federation congratulates Dr. Regina Benjamin on her new role as America's surgeon general. Today's release of the citizen's petition and organizational sign-on letter marks the formation of a massive, diverse community, partnering together around the common goal of getting America's families healthy again and reconnected with nature. The medical, education, and environmental communities ask the surgeon general to recommend that all American children and their families take time everyday to *Be Out There* and interact with the natural world."

Today's children have had less contact with nature than any generation in human history. A new [study](#) released by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that daily media use among young kids and teens is up dramatically from five years ago. The average American child (ages 8 to 18) now spends seven hours 38 minutes plugged in per day. That's 53 hours per week watching electronic entertainment media—more than the equivalent of a full-time work week.

While this is a troubling trend for the future of conservation, our economy, the health of our children, and the well-being of our communities are also at stake. Over the last 20 years childhood obesity has doubled, adolescent obesity has tripled, and instances of ADHD have increased. There is compelling research in the fields of public health, psychology, and elsewhere documenting that America's 'indoor childhood' has

significant implications on a child's physical and mental health. Children reap significant benefits when encouraged to spend active time in an outdoor setting interacting with nature.

Daily Physical Activity

The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommend that children and adolescents should accumulate one hour or more of daily physical activity that is mostly aerobic and leads to stronger bones and muscles. Active, outdoor play is an excellent way to meet these guidelines.

Sheila Franklin, Executive Director of National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (NCPA), said today:

“A 2005 study showed that more than 30 percent of teens failed to meet national recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity. Regular physical activity plays a critical role in the prevention of chronic illness, regarded as a top priority in health reform for Americans. The NCPA looks forward to working with Dr. Benjamin this year to address continuing health issues such as increasing American's physical activity. It is important to instill in our children the importance of daily physical activity. The upcoming inaugural *National Physical Activity Plan* will include a variety of strategies that encourage families to spend active time outdoors.”

Childhood Obesity

Obesity is a risk factor for a number of chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis, and sleep apnea. Furthermore, the health cost of obesity in the United States could be as high as \$147 billion annually, according to a study from the Research Triangle Institute and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Children who play outdoors are more active and burn more calories than those who sit in front of a television or computer.

Kimberly Avila Edwards MD, FAAP, Department of Pediatrics, UT Southwestern-Austin, Dell Children's Hospital, said today:

“Children who are outdoors are more physically active than those who sit in front of a television or computer. The health of America's children mirrors the strength of our nation's future, and the childhood obesity epidemic is one of the greatest health challenges we face. Physical activity, including being outside in fresh air, plays a critical role in the treatment and prevention of pediatric and adult health issues. Combating obesity, heart disease, diabetes, joint problems, and even depression will take a coordinated effort across a broad spectrum of organizations. We support Dr. Benjamin and look forward to collaborating for a solution.”

Eyesight

Children who regularly spend time outside may be less likely than their peers to develop nearsightedness, according to recent research reported in the journal *Optometry and Vision Science*. Participating children who spent more time outside during the day tended to have better distance vision than those who favored indoor activities.

Classroom Preparedness

NWF's report [TIME OUT: Using the Outdoors to Enhance Classroom Performance](#) highlights vast research linking time kids spend outside to increased classroom preparedness. America's increasingly indoor lifestyle causes several factors that work against high performance in the classroom. Lack of unstructured playtime outdoors for some children leads to:

- Shorter Attention Spans
- Increased Aggressive Behavior
- Higher Stress and Depression

National Wildlife Federation, participants, and partners today express their support of the benefits of outdoor play, and urge Dr. Benjamin to issue a clarion call to reconnect children with outdoor physical activity and good health.

Michael Rich, M.D., M.P.H., said today:

"As a physician, child health researcher, and parent, I am concerned that excessive media exposure can exacerbate children's risk for obesity, anxiety, violence, risky sex, smoking, and substance abuse. The natural world is an inextricable part of who we are, as individuals and as Americans. When children are immersed in the virtual world, they are denied a connection that is not only vital to their physical, mental, and social health, but to their imagination, their identity, and their souls."

Dr. Rich is the Director of the Center on Media and Child Health, Children's Hospital Boston; Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Associate Professor at Harvard School of Public Health.

NWF invites you to make the **2010 Be Out There Resolution** to spend more time outside in the New Year. Every parent and family that takes the pledge will receive the *Know, Go, and Grow Be Out There Toolkit* with important facts, fun tips, and interactive tools to help stick to the resolution. Visit www.beoutthere.org/resolution.

National Wildlife Federation is America's largest conservation organization inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future. NWF's [Be Out There](#) campaign encourages families across America to get outside on a daily basis to improve their physical and mental health. The benefits of outdoor play are real: healthier kids with a life-long appreciation of wildlife and nature.

Visit www.BeOutThere.org to learn more and to view the citizen's petition and sign on letter.

Patrick Fitzgerald, NWF Director of Education Advocacy, (202) 797-6821 or FitzgeraldP@nwf.org

Amanda Cooke, NWF Communications Associate, (703) 438-6041 or CookeA@nwf.org

###