



The effects of the natural environment on attention and family functioning: an experimental study

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Abstract: A large body of research has shown that exposure to the natural environment improves attention for individuals; yet few studies have explored whether a walk in nature is restorative for family members walking together and the aftereffects of the walk on family relationships. The current study utilized a within-subjects experimental design to: 1) explore the effects of a walk in nature compared to a walk indoors on individual family members' attentional functioning, 2) examine the quality of family interactions after each walk, 3) test whether enhanced attentional functioning predicts improved family functioning outcomes, and 4) investigate the family benefits of long-term exposure to nature. Twenty-seven mother-daughter (10-12 years old) dyads participated in two counterbalanced experimental conditions - a 20-minute walk at an arboretum and a 20-minute walk at a mall (spaced one week apart); followed by a 10-minute family interaction task. Before and after each walk attention was measured using the Digit Span Backwards test; family functioning outcomes (in terms of dyadic cohesion, positivity, and negativity) were measured using direct observational coding methods. Study findings showed that exposure to nature restored individual attention, especially for mothers, and contributed to improved family functioning, including greater cohesion and less individual negativity. Findings also revealed that enhanced attentional functioning predicted positivity and negativity among daughters during the family interaction tasks. Finally, spending more time in nature per month was also a significant predictor of greater cohesion after the nature condition for both mothers and daughters. These findings indicate that a short-term exposure to nature can enhance attention for individual family members walking together as well as contribute to greater family functioning outcomes. Moreover, families who regularly spend time outside may also benefit from repeated exposures to nature.

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