

Beyond Their Four Walls

Lone Star Family Health Center Writes Rx for Nature

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Fostering good health in a community requires more than simply treating patients in a clinic setting — it requires encouraging families to live a healthier lifestyle overall. By writing prescriptions for outdoor activity, doctors at **Lone Star Family Health Center** (LSFHC) in Conroe, TX are trying to override the adverse effects that lengthy exposure to “screen time” has on patients.

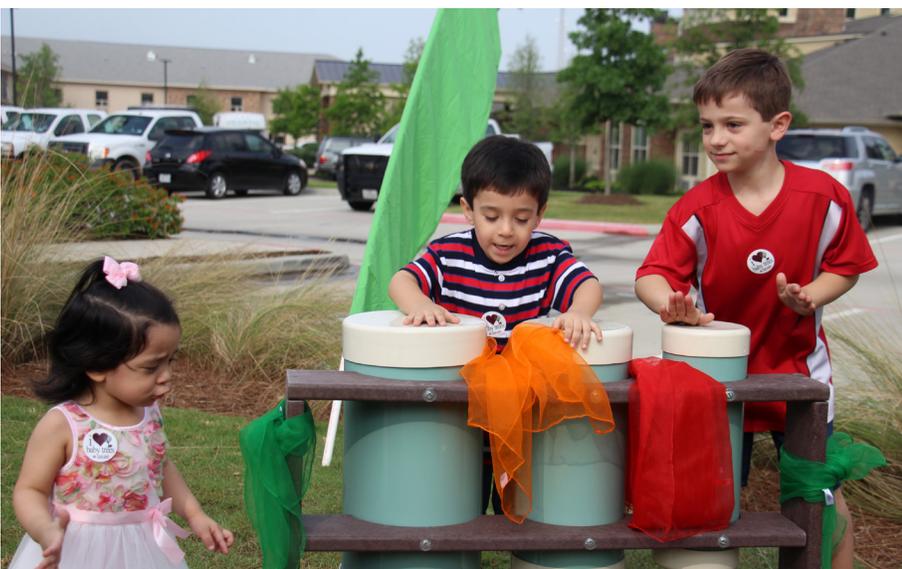
Research citing the negative effect of frequent use of television, video games, computers and smartphones is readily available with results ranging from poor sleep and behavior problems to obesity and ADHD. In contrast, time spent outside, interacting with nature, is proven to reduce obesity, improve concentration, lower anxiety and improve social relation-

ships. So how do doctors convey the critical need for patients to be outdoors? By writing a prescription for their patients to spend time outside.

This year on Arbor Day, Lone Star Family Health Center became the first federally qualified health center to open a Certified Nature Explore® classroom. The classroom, developed in collaboration with organizations such as Nature Explore® and the U.S. Forest Service, repurposed 2,500 square feet of unused lawn into an outdoor space with six activity stations, a bridge and water feature, and space for children to sit and relax in the shade. The project came to fruition after three years of advocacy by LSFHC Medical Director Dr. Daniel Porter.

“Every day, our staff works to care for the whole patient, including their social, physical and mental health needs,” says Dr. Porter. “This classroom is a unique feature we can offer our patients, giving them a ‘prescription’ for the medicine of being outdoors.”

The positive effects of the “medicine” of being outdoors are well documented. According to the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, a partner in Nature Explore®, children who spend time in outdoor classrooms engaging in unstructured play develop kinesthetic skills such as stability, core balance, walking, climbing and lifting as well as visual-spatial



skills, social, math and science skills.

Beyond skill development, time spent outside has been shown to reduce stress in children by up to 28 percent, help children with ADHD concentrate better, reduce the likelihood of children being overweight by between 27 and 41 percent and lower the chances of children developing diabetes.

At LSFHC, almost half of the patients are children. Increasingly, these children are suffering from obesity, asthma, anxiety and diabetes. Dr. Porter feels strongly that his patients need to be encouraged to change their lifestyles, stepping away from screen time and engaging more in physical activities. For optimal health and development, children require more than one sensory experience. Children he sees spend hours in front of televisions and playing video games, missing out on sensory experiences such as texture, taste, temperature and others, not to mention the necessary exercise children require to develop and grow in a healthy way. It is hoped that the Nature Explore Classroom® will serve as a first step to getting families outside.

Lone Star Family Health Center strives to be a place where the community can go to learn how to lead healthier lives, not only a place to go when they are sick. By offering this Classroom, the health center hopes to become even more of a resource to its community.

The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) visited the health center to facilitate training for its doctors about the science behind the need for children to be outdoors and how to properly encourage outdoor play. A special prescription was



designed so that the doctors could truly write their patients prescriptions to spend time outdoors.

The building of this Classroom came from extensive research and design. Using the provided Adventure Guides, children and parents can navigate through the Nature Explore® Classroom's building area, garden area, climbing area, nature art area, music and movement station, messy materials area and an open space. There is also a water feature and seating areas where families can relax. But children often choose not to follow the guide, preferring to use the messy materials area to build wooden "cars" and pile tree cookies one on top of the other until the pile is so tall it topples over.

Also, seashells collected in Galveston, TX and donated by LSFHC's CEO, combined with tree pods in the nature art area, prompt pretend trips to the beach and a small hill in the open area leads to downhill foot races. The water feature turns into a nature-themed splash pad and the music and movement area becomes inspiration for imaginary stunts as a famous drummer.

All of this is designed to lead to more outdoor time for the health center's patients. A handmade sign construct-

ed by a local Eagle Scout points out that there are other opportunities for outdoor adventures in the area, listing the distance to nearby state parks. On the back of the Prescription for Outdoor Activity is a list of websites of local parks and greenways families can visit. The hope is that time spent playing in the Classroom inspires families to explore other outdoor activities.

It is the desire of Lone Star Family Health Center that other community health centers and medical facilities will begin to work with Nature Explore® and other organizations to build not just play spaces on their sites, but outdoor learning opportunities. As the world around health center patients, and all of us, becomes increasingly more technology-driven, it is the responsibility of health centers to encourage the communities they serve to step away from the constant draw toward screen time and take the time to go for a walk, play a game of catch, find a nearby park or just sit outdoors and watch birds.

As Dr. Porter reminds the staff at Lone Star — if the organization is not thinking outside of the box and finding ways to teach patients about the importance of physical activity, it is not doing its job. If you are reading this article, your health center has the same opportunity to step outside of its clinic and encourage a healthier community in new ways. Find your own opportunity to put research into action. ♦

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