



# Cities Connecting Children to Nature

**NLC** NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES  
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

Children & Nature Network

## EQUITABLE NATURE CONNECTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: An Overview of the CCCN Toolkit

[Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#) (CCCN), a joint initiative of the [National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families](#) and the [Children & Nature Network](#), helps city leaders and their partners ensure that all children have the opportunity to play, learn and grow in nature. Launched in 2014 with anchor support from The JPB Foundation, CCCN includes cities across the U.S. that create programs, partnerships and policies, and infrastructure to help kids learn, play and grow with nature as a key part of their daily lives. Cities use a variety of strategies, implemented through parks, schools, libraries, and early childhood settings.

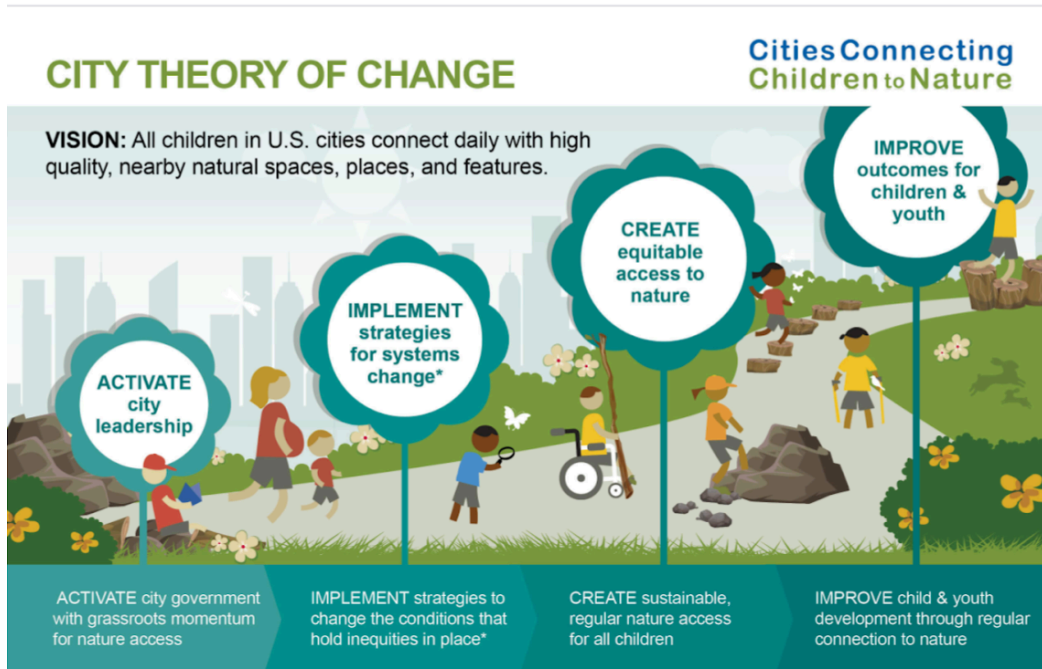
CCCN sees nature connection as important for children for a number of reasons:

- Increasingly indoor and sedentary lifestyles have created pressing child development issues such as rising rates of obesity, mental illness and chronic disease in children.
- Too many children currently miss out on the benefits of regular nature connection, which include enhanced health, increased social and emotional skills, and improved academic outcomes.
- Longstanding systems of inequity have reduced access to safe, outdoor spaces and experiences.

### CCCN INITIATIVE VISION AND THEORY OF CHANGE

According to the CCCN Theory of Change, engaging city governments along with grassroots momentum for nature access for young children will lead cities to implement strategies to change the conditions that hold inequities in nature access for young children in place. This leads to the creation of sustainable, regular nature access for all young children, regardless of race or income. Children and youth development outcomes will improve through regular connection to nature.

As a next step in realizing the initiative's overall vision for connecting all children in the US to nature, **CCCN now seeks to expand opportunities for *all young children* in U.S. cities to connect daily with nature in their communities, including at early childhood programs, parks, and public spaces and facilities.**



CCCN already engages with several dozen cities and six state and regional intermediaries to expand children’s equitable access to nature via development of additional green schoolyards, out of school time opportunities, Nature Smart Libraries, and other strategic local steps.

## THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIES

Cities are uniquely positioned to advance policies, invest in infrastructure, implement and evaluate programs, create partnerships, and allocate resources to reach children who are less likely to attend nature preschools, live near high-quality parks and green spaces, or participate in nature-based programs. Indeed, numerous cities have taken steps to foster early childhood nature connection, on their own and with the support of statewide and national partners, providing valuable lessons for other cities with interest.

For example, cities can help expand naturalized outdoor spaces in early learning programs, build nature play spaces in parks and at public facilities, and collaborate with partners who have trusted relationships with families of young children to introduce nature-based programming. City investment in early childhood nature connection supports a variety of city priorities, including school readiness, health and wellness, climate resilience, and community development.

Federal pandemic recovery resources, including the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, provide unprecedented additional opportunities for cities to prioritize early childhood nature connection.

## PATHWAYS TO CONNECT YOUNG CHILDREN TO NATURE

This toolkit includes four in-depth descriptions of what CCCN has come to call “pathways” -- tested methods to connect young children to nature. CCCN learned about these via a recent national landscape scan. The four pathways – which frequently overlap and are not mutually exclusive – include:

- developing nature play spaces in parks and public spaces
- adding nature to outdoor spaces in early childhood programs, including centers, preschools, and family, friend, and neighbor care
- providing nature-based programming at city facilities, such as libraries and recreation centers
- Introducing/expanding city-supported nature preschools

## CITY PARTNERS

Successful early childhood nature connection initiatives require strong and diverse partnerships. Potential partners include:

- Early Childhood agencies or coalitions
- City/county agencies such as Parks and Recreation, Planning, Sustainability, Public Health, Early Childhood
- Health care systems
- Community- and faith-based organizations
- Local funders (e.g. United Way)
- School Districts
- Universities
- Early childhood professionals

## CROSS-CUTTING CONSIDERATIONS

As city teams and partners implement any of the four pathways, three additional areas for consideration arise:

**Aligning state child care licensing requirements and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS):**

State level child care licensing regulations can lay the groundwork for early childhood nature connection by requiring outdoor time, permitting natural materials and nature-based learning for at least some period of each day, and providing for full-day nature-based early childhood programming. State and local Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) can further support this by identifying nature exposure and engagement as components of a high-quality childcare program.

**Professional development for staff:** The expertise and confidence of those who work with young children underpins high-quality nature experiences in all settings.. To enhance children’s connection to

nature, educators need to develop an understanding of nature and feel connected to it. They also need strategies for fostering nature connectedness among young children.

**Family and caregiver engagement to support early childhood nature connection:** Parents and caregivers are young children’s first teachers. Any strategy to enhance young children’s connection to nature should also prioritize family engagement, helping families and caregivers to feel comfortable in nature and giving them ideas and strategies to share nature with their children. Engaging families in priority setting and co-design of nature spaces and programs for young children will also help to ensure that what is developed is more likely to be utilized. Cities may need to partner with organizations that work closely with families to do this.

## **BENEFITS & RESEARCH**

Providing young children, ages 0 - 5, with regular access to nature improves physical and mental health, develops social-emotional skills and better prepares children for school. The CCCN [infographic one-pager](#) helps visually explain the research-backed benefits to young children from regular time outdoors. It can be used to help make the case for early childhood nature connection strategies.

For more in depth resources, this annotated bibliography of research compiles studies that show the benefits of early childhood nature connection. The [annotated bibliography](#) was commissioned by CCCN as part of the initiative's landscape scan.