


National Kids Survey
Part IV: Favorite Activities for Spending Time
Outdoors

A RECREATION Research Report in the IRIS Series¹

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¹ The Internet Research Information Series (IRIS) is an internet accessible science report series covering outdoor recreation statistics (**RECSTATS**), wilderness research (**WILDERNESS**) and other human-dimension and demographics research (**DEMOSTATS**) related to natural resources. This research is a collaborative effort between the USDA Forest Service's Southern Research Station and its Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Athens, Georgia; the University of Georgia in Athens; and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee.

<http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IrisReports.html>

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Iris photo is courtesy of Jessica Mou.

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction.....	1
National Kids Survey.....	1
Results.....	2
Kids Activities Outdoors.....	2
Participation in Active and Passive Activities.....	5
Summary.....	6
Why are these results important?.....	7

Tables:

Table 1.— Percentages of boys and girls indicating an activity as their favorite for outdoor time.....	3
Table 2.— Percentages of kids indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time by race/ethnicity.....	5
Table 3.— Percentage of kids indicating participation in one or more physically active or in one of more passive activities, and percentages indicating whether those activities are their favorites.....	6

Figures:

Figure 1.—Percent of Kids 6 to 19 indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time.....	3
Figure 2.—Percentages of kids of different ages indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time.....	4

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Introduction

Previously in this research series, we wrote that over 60 percent of kids 6–19 reported spending two or more hours outdoors on a typical *weekday*. We also reported that over three-fourths spent two or more hours outdoors on a typical *weekend* day. Almost one-half reported spending four or more hours outdoors on a typical weekend day. During this time outdoors, the outdoor activity with the highest participation rate (83 percent) was that of “just playing or hanging out outdoors.” Second, with 79 percent participation rate, was biking, jogging, walking, skate boarding or similar activity. Playing music or using other electronic devices outdoors was third, followed by playing or practicing team sports and reading or studying outdoors. This survey looks only at time and activity by kids outdoors.

In this part of the Report Series dealing with kids, **Part IV**, we cover activities viewed by kids as their outdoor favorites. Comparisons are made between boys and girls, age groups, and race. Also covered is a comparison of participation rates between active and passive outdoor activities.

National Kids Survey

The **National Kids Survey** is conducted through the University of Tennessee as a companion survey to the on-going recreation survey of American adults, the **National Survey on Recreation and the Environment** (NSRE). Both surveys are general population, random digit-dialed household telephone surveys. Initial telephoning is accomplished by calling a random, cross-sectional sample of non-institutionalized residents of the United States who are 16 years of age or older. The Human Dimensions Research Laboratory at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, an on-going NSRE cooperator, conducts NSRE household interviews almost daily. The University of Georgia collaborates in survey design and reporting.

The survey system used is computer-assisted (typically referred to as a CATI system). Trained interviewers work from a computer and screen monitor to enter responses from selected individuals automatically as telephone interviews proceed. The average length of an overall NSRE interview is restricted to 14 minutes. The National Kids Survey questions last about three to four minutes.

It is important to note that the data are weighted to account for any over or under representation of age, gender, or race. There are eight age/sex strata (four for each gender). Age groups include 6-9, 10-12, 13-15, and 16-19. The youth strata weights are the ratios of U.S. Census: Kids Survey strata proportions. These ratio weights are applied to each individual respondent according to their demographic profile.

A question asked of the randomly selected household member chosen as a respondent for the NSRE survey is whether there are any kids in the household under the age of 16. If so, a proxy household member aged 20 or older (parent, guardian, grandparent, older sibling, etc.) is asked to speak for the young person selected for the **National Kids**

Survey. Teens 16 to 19 are interviewed directly. If there is more than one child under 16 in the household, the child with the last birthday is selected. The sample size as of the end of April 2009 was 1,201. Data continues to be collected. The following are among the questions asked and are the focus for this report.

1. *During the past week, in which of the following **types of outdoor activities** did the young person in your household participate?* (The order of the list of activities was randomized. The activities included are shown in Table 1 below. Youth 16 – 19 answered for themselves. Responses to this question were summarized in a previous report.)

Following this question respondents were then asked:

2. *Which **one** of these activities is their (your) favorite?* (The word “your” was substituted for respondents 16 – 19 years old. Only one activity could be selected.)

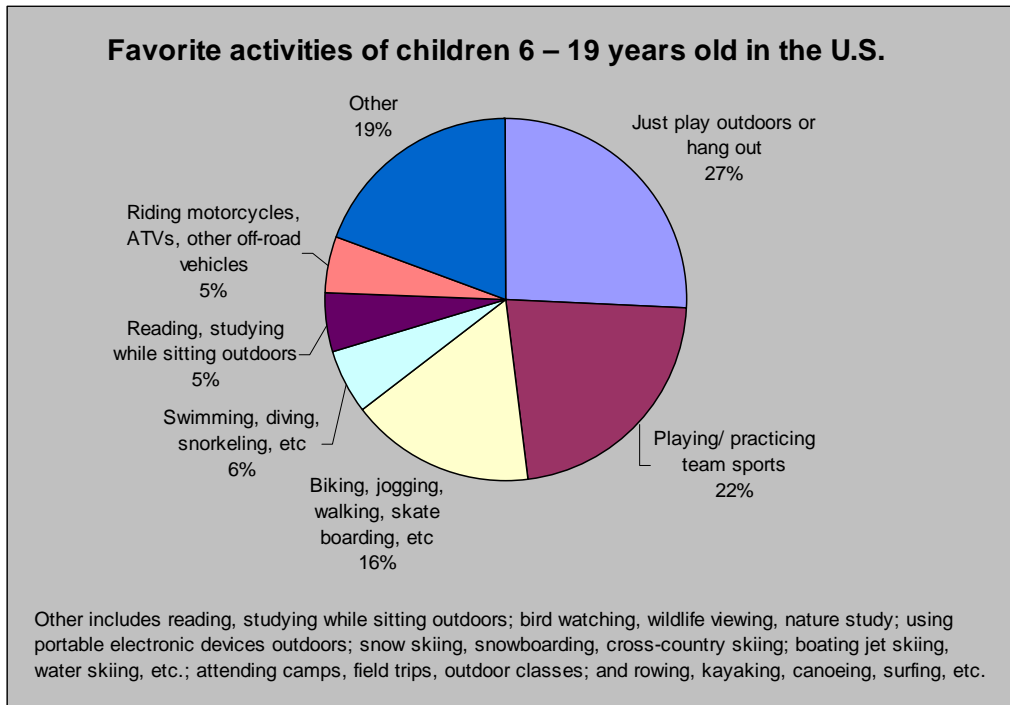
Results

Kids Favorite Activity Outdoors

Of the outdoor activities we asked about, just playing or hanging out (26%) and playing or practicing team sports (22%) were ranked at the top as favorites (**Figure 1**). Next, at a not-too-distant third, was biking, jogging, walking, or skating, etc., as a group of similar activities. Other activity groups for which 5% or more selected the activity as their favorite were swimming, diving, snorkeling, etc.; Riding motorcycles, ATVs or other off-road motor vehicles; and reading or studying.

There are noticeable differences in choice of favorite activities between boys and girls (**Table 1**). Much higher percentages of boys than girls selected team sports. For girls, much higher percentages selected swimming/diving, reading/studying, using portable electronic devices outdoors, and attending camps or field trips. Percentages were very similar between boys and girls for playing or hanging out and for biking/jogging/walking/etc. The “other” category in Table 1 included a very wide range of activities not otherwise listed (see below).

Figure 1.—Percent of Kids 6 to 19 indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time.



Source: NSRE National Kids Survey, N=1,201. Interview dates: 9/15/07 to 4/27/09. Age group sample sizes: Age 6 to 9 (n=352), Age 10 to 12(n=272), Age 13 to 15 (n=294), Age 16 to 19 (n=203), Total (n=1,121).

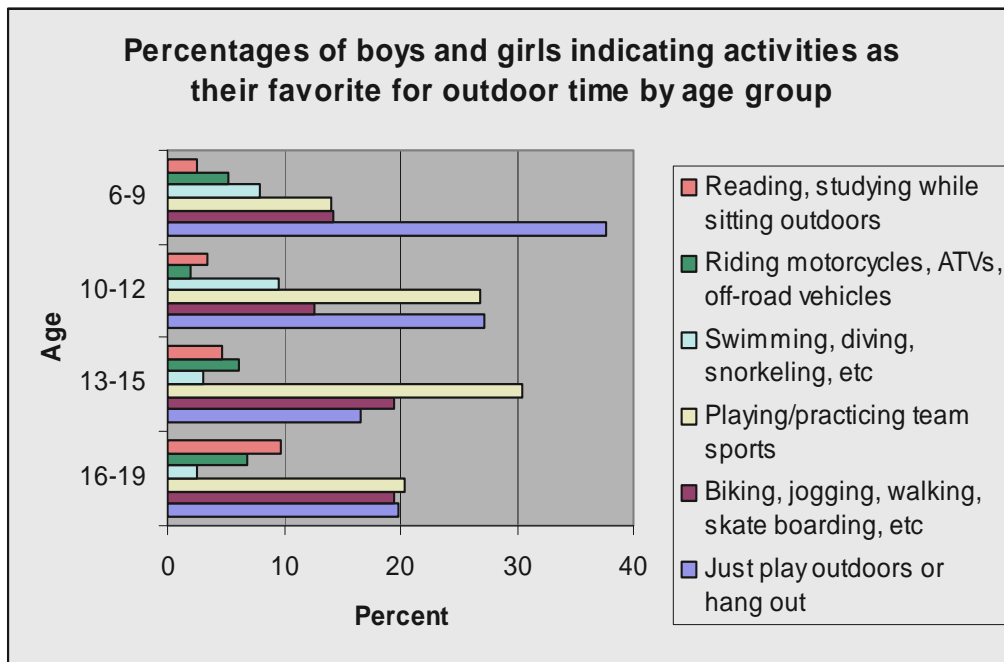
Table 1.—Percentages of boys and girls indicating an activity as their favorite for outdoor time.

Activity	Male	Female
	%	%
Playing/practicing team sports	27.7	16.0
Just playing outdoors or hanging out	25.6	26.3
Biking, jogging, walking, skate boarding, etc	17.6	15.1
Hiking, camping, fishing, etc.	5.4	2.1
Riding motorcycles, ATVs, other off-road vehicles	5.1	5.2
Swimming, diving, snorkeling, etc	4.3	7.4
Playing/practicing other sports	3.1	4.1
Reading, studying while sitting outdoors	2.5	8.1
Bird watching, wildlife viewing, nature study	2.5	1.2
Using portable electronic devices outdoors	1.9	3.4
Snow skiing, snowboarding, cross-country skiing	0.9	0.8
Boating, jet skiing, water skiing, etc	0.4	0.3
Attending camps, field trips, outdoor classes	0.3	2.9
Rowing, kayaking, canoeing, surfing, etc	0.2	0.3
Other	2.5	6.8

Source: NSRE National Kids Survey, N=1,201. Interview dates: 9/15/07 to 4/27/09. Age group sample sizes: Age 6 to 9 (n=352), Age 10 to 12(n=272), Age 13 to 15 (n=294), Age 16 to 19 (n=203), Total (n=1,121).

By far, for the age group 6 to 9 years old, playing or hanging out is favored compared with any of the other activities. Unstructured playing is viewed by many professionals as very good for childrens’ health and emotional stability. For 10–12 year olds, playing sports, and as well playing or hanging out, are about equal as favored activities. For 13–15 year olds, playing or practicing sports is favored by the largest percentages. Biking, jogging or other similar activity and playing are close seconds. For the older group, 16–19 year olds, the favored activities are three---team sports, biking/jogging etc., and playing and hanging out.

Figure 2.—Percentages of kids of different ages indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time.



Source: NSRE National Kids Survey, N=1,201. Interview dates: 9/15/07 to 4/27/09. Age group sample sizes: Age 6 to 9 (n=352), Age 10 to 12(n=272), Age 13 to 15 (n=294), Age 16 to 19 (n=203), Total (n=1,121).

As shown in **Table 2**, much higher percentages of Non-Hispanic Blacks listed playing or hanging out as their favorite activity outdoors. For team sports, in order by percentages, Non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, and Non-Hispanic Whites listed team sports as their favorite activity. Whites had the highest percentage of any group listing riding motor vehicles off road as their favorite activity outdoors. Whites and Hispanics had the highest percentages for swimming and diving. Hispanics and Blacks had the highest percentages favoring reading or studying outdoors.

Table 2.—Percentages of kids indicating activities as their favorite for outdoor time by race/ethnicity.

	White	Black	Hispanic
Activity	%	%	%
Just playing outdoors or hang out	24.2	37.1	21.8
Playing/practicing team sports	19.6	32.3	25.6
Biking, jogging, walking, skate boarding, etc	17.0	10.8	14.2
Riding motorcycles, ATVs, other off-road vehicles	7.7	0.9	0.9
Swimming, diving, snorkeling, etc	6.0	1.2	8.7
Reading, studying while sitting outdoors	3.2	7.2	8.5

Source: NSRE National Kids Survey, N=1,201. Interview dates: 9/15/07 to 4/27/09. Race/ethnicity sample sizes: White (n=911), Black (n=92), Hispanic (n=72), Other (n=33), Total (n=1,108). 'Other' races include American Indians and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders.

Participation in Active and Passive Activities

The question often comes up regarding whether kids participate more in active or in passive outdoor activities. To help in addressing this question, activities asked of kids or their proxies were classified as either physically active or not physically active (i.e., passive). Although playing and hanging out can be active, we classified it as passive. Classifications are shown below:

Playing/practicing team sports—Active
Just playing outdoors or hanging out—Passive
Biking, jogging, walking, skate boarding, etc---Active
Hiking, camping, fishing, etc.---Active
Riding motorcycles, ATVs, other off-road vehicles---Active
Swimming, diving, snorkeling, etc---Active
Playing/practicing other sports---Active
Reading, studying while sitting outdoors---Passive
Bird watching, wildlife viewing, nature study---Passive
Using portable electronic devices outdoors---Passive
Snow skiing, snowboarding, cross-country skiing---Active
Boating, jet skiing, water skiing, etc---Active
Attending camps, field trips, outdoor classes---Passive
Rowing, kayaking, canoeing, surfing, etc---Active
Other---Mixed, therefore not classified as either

The Kids Survey was designed so that respondents could indicate *participation* in all activities that applied. Thus, adding numbers of respondents across activities in both the “active” and the “passive” categories resulted in somewhat larger percentages than observed for participation in any one activity group. The data were analyzed to estimate the percentages participating in one or more of the *active*, and in one or more of the *passive* activity groups. It is very interesting that the active category was slightly higher than the passive category (**Table 3**) as this is not what most other observers seem to believe. Almost 95 percent participated in one or more active activities, and almost 94 percent participated in one or more of the passive activities in the past week.

Table 3.—Percentage of kids indicating participation in one or more physically active or in one of more passive activities, and percentages indicating whether those activities are their favorites (Percentages under favorites, when added with “other” activities, sum to 100 percent because they could select only one. Percentages participating do not sum to 100 because they could identify participation in both active and passive activities.)

Type of Activities	Percent Participating	Percent Indicating Favorite
Active	94.8	56.8
Passive	93.9	36.4

Source: NSRE National Kids Survey, N=1,201. Interview dates: 9/15/07 to 4/27/09. Age group sample sizes: Age 6 to 9 (n=352), Age 10 to 12(n=272), Age 13 to 15 (n=294), Age 16 to 19 (n=203), Total (n=1,121).

The “other” activities kids participated in, as noted above, is a mixture that includes yard work, landscaping, gardening, horseback riding, band, playing with a pet, farm chores, cheerleading, using a trampoline, attending football games, etc. These activities are among those most frequently mentioned, but the list is long and varied. For example, additional activities that some kids included were paint ball, geo-caching, playing haunted house, volunteer service, and star gazing. Generally, Whites listed more often than others one or more of these “other activities” for their outdoor time. From this list of “other” activities kids participated in, they could indicate whether one of them was their favorite outdoor activity. Of the “other” activities identified as favorites, the most frequently mentioned ones were horseback riding, band, cheerleading, yard work and playing with or walking a pet.

Summary

Just playing or hanging out (26%) and playing or practicing team sports (22%) were ranked at the top as favorites. Next, at a not-too-distant third, was biking, jogging, walking, or skating, etc., as a group of similar physically active activities. There are noticeable differences in choice of favorite activities between boys and girls. For example, much higher percentages of boys than girls selected team sports. For girls, much higher percentages selected swimming/diving, reading/studying, using portable electronic devices outdoors, and attending camps or field trips.

For the age group 6 to 9 years old, playing or hanging out was listed as the most favored activity. For 10–12 year olds, playing sports, and as well playing or hanging out were

about equal as favored activities. For 13–15 year olds, playing or practicing sports was favored by the largest percentage, while biking, jogging or other similar activity and playing were close seconds. For the older group, 16–19 year olds, the favored activities were three---team sports, biking/jogging etc., and playing or hanging out. Much higher percentages of Non-Hispanic Blacks listed playing or hanging out as their favorite activity outdoors, while Non-Hispanic Whites listed team sports as their favorite activity. Whites had the highest percentage of any group selecting riding motor vehicles off road as their favorite. Whites and Hispanics had the higher percentages listing swimming and diving. Hispanics and Blacks had higher percentages favoring reading or studying outdoors.

The “other” activities kids participated in is a mixture that includes yard work, landscaping, gardening, horseback riding, band, playing with a pet, farm chores, cheerleading, using a trampoline, attending football games, etc. Additional activities that some kids included were paint ball, geo-caching, playing haunted house, volunteer service, and star gazing. Generally, Whites listed more often than others one or more of these “other activities” for their outdoor time, such as horseback riding, band, cheerleading, yard work and playing with or walking a pet.

Why Are These Results Important?

There is general agreement that the more we know about what kids do and like to do outdoors, the better. With such knowledge we are more informed and better able to improve the strategic effectiveness of outdoor youth programs. Efficiency in investment of scarce program funds is almost always improved when decisions are based on research, as well as on experience and intuition. For example, it would be hard to imagine that the CDC would allocate funds to a major health initiative without solid medical research to back that investment. It would also be hard to imagine that Microsoft would allocate funds to development of a major product line without solid research and testing.

We in the public and NGO sectors which have interests in the future of today’s kids are no different. We need all the research and information we can get. Everyone it seems is concerned about youth obesity, health, emotional stability, performance in school and connections with nature. Likewise, everyone knows that kids spend their time differently now than they (we) used to. But, how much do we know about what this means in terms of whether kids’ also spend time outdoors, and what they like to do outdoors? The answer, it seems, is we really don’t know very much. However, collectively, but slowly, the research community is closing this gap.

For instance, the research reported in this IRIS series (Four Parts up to now) provides some valuable and much needed insights into the world of kids, in particular, insights into their structured and unstructured recreation activities. We now know a bit more about the time kids spend outdoors, what they do outdoors, and what they like most to do outdoors. We also know that boys and girls, different age groups, and different ethnicities exhibit different patterns of outdoor time and activities. To us this suggests an opportunity to more tightly aim program messaging, education, group outdoor activities, and followup.

To us, the research we have presented thus far also indicates that exposure to nature might be accomplished through activities kids participate in, especially those they enjoy most---even if they are not nature based. Perhaps we should challenge ourselves to think of ways kids involved in organized team sports can at the same time understand that the soil, air, and water they play on and in is part of nature.

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