

Great outdoors not so great among teens, survey finds

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Published 12:00 am PDT Tuesday, October 3, 2006
Story appeared in MAIN NEWS section, Page A3



Nearly 60 percent of parents surveyed last month say their teenagers' interest in outdoor activities is declining. Bucking that trend is 17-year-old Bryan Caselli, above and left, of Land Park, who prefers not to spend his leisure time indoors. "I would rather be outside on a skateboard," he said. Sacramento Bee/Bryan Patrick/Bryan Patrick

A pickup game of basketball or a bike ride to the local swimming pool are fading summer pastimes for California youths, who are increasingly drawn to the computer keyboard and flat-screen entertainment, according to a new survey.

Television, computers and video games were the top factors causing a decline in teenagers' interest in the outdoors, 89 percent of parents reported in a survey of summer youth activity done for the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council.

"I was disappointed in what I was reading, but I was not surprised," said Jayne Battey, executive director of the Bay Area nonprofit.

The Stewardship Council distributed \$2.25 million in grants statewide this year toward encouraging outdoor youth activity and is interested in gauging that activity, particularly among underserved populations.

It's a gauge that reflects broader concerns, such as health issues, academic performance and physical fitness, Battey said.

Parents of California children 13 to 17 years old were surveyed online during September, with 605 of 2,600 parents responding for the survey, including 7 percent from Sacramento County.

Although 70 percent of parents rated the access to outdoor activities as either good or excellent, nearly 60 percent said their children's interest in the outdoors is declining.

Almost 30 percent of the parents said their children never visited any kind of park this past summer, with only 3 percent going 10 times or more.

Only 3 percent of parents reported their teens went hiking more than 10 times during the summer, and 46 percent said they never went.

But it's hardly vacant outdoors.

For 17-year-old Bryan Caselli, the perfect summer day adds up with a skateboard and several of his friends, pushing each other to board perfection. He spends less than a couple of hours a week at MySpace.com and has only a few television shows he watches.

"I would rather be outside on a skateboard," he said.

Bryan, who lives in the Land Park neighborhood of Sacramento, isn't even turned off by rain. He and friends relish a game of tackle football in the mud of Land Park, he said.

He is inspired by his father, a runner, and his mother, who works out regularly at home, he said.

"My dad is really busy with work, but he gets up while it's still dark and he goes running," Bryan said.

Bryan, his 13-year-old sister, who plays soccer and volleyball, and a 20-year-old brother at Fresno State University were all on swim teams, said Mike Caselli, father of the brood.

"None of our kids is anything more than middle of the pack, and we are completely happy with that," said Caselli, a banker.

He believes that peer involvement is the biggest influence.

"They're active because they want to be," Caselli said. "We'd definitely encourage them, but they wanted to do these on their own. That their friends do this with them is a big plus. Your kids are going to be a reflection of their friends."

As a child, Elizabeth Goldstein spent summer days freely playing outdoors in her South Bronx neighborhood until her mother hung a towel from their 12th-story apartment window to signal time to come home for dinner.

Now, as executive director of California State Parks Foundation, she has a word for the kind of tree-climbing, stickball-playing, bicycle-riding, dog-running time outdoors so common a generation or two ago: self-guided play.

Not only is the trend toward electronic gadgetry luring youths away from self-guided play, it is also making them feel less comfortable in the great outdoors, she said.

One of the problems is fewer open spaces for self-guided play by an increasingly urban population, Goldstein said.

"Lives are very structured now," she said. "It's all about balance, isn't it?"

In a state like California, bonding with the outdoors should be a natural because of assets like the world-class Sierra, the expansive deserts and the long coastline, she said.

"In California, we have an embarrassment of riches," Golstein said.

One challenge for organizations like the Stewardship Council is overcoming changing demographics -- cultures that might not emphasize outdoor activities such as camping or families different from the typical two-parent ones, Battey said.

They're trying.

One of the grants the council awarded went to the State Park Foundation for its camping program for economically disadvantaged families, providing equipment and guidance as a way to introduce them to the experience.

At the Sunrise Recreation and Park District, teenagers eagerly sign up for social programs the district offers, but there isn't exactly a clamor for teen recreation classes, even though golf and tennis are popular with adults, said Lisa Rudloff, superintendent of recreation and community services with the district.

"It's hard to program for that group," she said. "We don't give up trying."

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