



POWER PLAY:

Studies show how playing outside improves mental health and builds bridges

I was introduced to the power of play early in life by my mother, Althea Petritz who, when she learned her firstborn was a girl, vowed to teach me how to play.

And that she did.

My parents made their home and started a business in northern Michigan because of its quality of life – magnificent views, fresh water lakes and rivers, beaches, forests and clean air.

Northern Michigan was their cherished outdoor playground and their priority was sharing it with their young family. We swam in Crystal Lake, biked, took family canoe trips, played tennis and vacationed on Beaver Island.

Our love affair with this playground didn't end when summer friends and relatives, reluctantly, returned to their city homes; it simply signaled that winter was on its way – skiing, skating, sledding and snow days, when the roads were impassable for the school buses, but not for our station wagon, filled with kids and skis, and bound for Buck Hills.

The skills and passion I gained as a child profoundly shaped my life, including college criteria (the school must have a ski team); my first job (in the ski business); meeting my husband and business partner Jim MacInnes (on a ski trip); and our decision to leave southern California in 1985 to join Crystal Mountain.

Fast forward 35 years and the arrival of the pandemic in 2020. Though stay-at-home restrictions were in place, many of Michigan's best outdoor playgrounds never closed.

After long days of virtual meetings and online learning platforms, hikes in places like Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore or Michigan Legacy Art

Park were safe places to exercise and be with loved ones.

Biking, paddling, golfing, roller-skating and blading were opportunities to refresh and find some normalcy in the eye of an insidious and terrifying global threat.

The pandemic spurred participation in outdoor recreation by every metric: park and campground visits, bicycle and RV sales, fishing and hunting licenses, boat sales and registrations, golf rounds played all increased.

And those participation levels weren't limited to summer: Winter sports visits including downhill and cross country skiing also increased.

A silver lining of the pandemic was that it was an invitation to newcomers to get outdoors and play, with more than 60% indicating they intend to continue to do so.

The economic impact of increased participation in outdoor recreation is reflected in the strong recovery of our Michigan tourism industry in many areas, including the Grand Traverse Region, which is exceeding pre-pandemic levels of business vitality.

But the power of play goes beyond economic impact.

While many people like my family have long intuitively recognized the mental and physical benefits of being and playing outdoors, there has been little empirical data to support their assumptions.

But that's changing. According to the National Institutes of Health, there is mounting clinical evidence that play and exercise in nature delivers a range of positive effects on physical health, psychological well-being, cognitive ability and social cohesion.

Based on mounting data, recreating outside in nature is now being recommended.

Dr. Robert Zarr from Park Rx Amer-

ica is leading data collection of clinical trials that support the health benefits and quantify economic savings of outdoor recreation prescriptions. These benefits may include stress relief, lower blood pressure, enhanced immune system and improved self-esteem. Some insurance companies are supporting this research.

At the Boardman River Nature Center, the Grand Traverse Conservation Department is constructing a nature playscape, which is a safe place for kids to get outside and connect with the natural world ... and each other, says Community Engagement Specialist Irene Stibitz.

A 2019 study from Denmark shows that simply growing up near outdoor spaces accounts for a 55% lower risk of developing mental health disorders in adulthood.

Children especially benefit from nature. Studies show that time outside improves their grades, friendships and behavior. Getting more kids outside more often could dramatically improve their health over a lifetime, because adults are twice as likely to get outside if they did so as children.

But the power of play is not just about kids. Living better longer can also be a benefit of play and I would suggest a valid observation would be that we grow old because we stop playing.

Never stop.

My last salute to the power of play is about building bridges.

Physically, Michigan's two magnificent and diverse peninsulas, surrounded by 20% of the world's fresh water, are connected by the Mighty Mac.

But culturally, our diverse state has long lacked a bridge for important social connections.

I believe that play, particularly outside, can unite us and help us connect with the rich cultural diversity that is also Michigan, where we can make new friendships, in safe places, doing fun stuff.

A small, but I believe important, example was this past March when northern Michigan kids from Crystal Community Ski Club hosted about 40 young kids in a Flint YMCA ski program.

Thanks to a grant from Share Winter (and a generous national organization that supports getting kids engaged in winter sports and collaboration with the Michigan Ski Industries Association) the Flint YMCA rented a motor coach and arrived at Crystal mid-morning.

Crystal Community Ski Club members welcomed these 40 kids, then introduced them to the ski slopes and amenities at Crystal.

It was a sunny day with lots of smiles and hugs as predominantly white CCSC kids shared their playground with kids from a predominantly Black urban community – many of whom had never even left Flint, let alone experienced a northern Michigan resort in winter.

We believe this play day was an example of how “little things can make a big difference,” to quote the subhead of Malcom Gladwell's “The Tipping Point.” And we hope there will be many more examples of such little things that can build important social bridges to connect all of Michigan, now and in the future.

Chris MacInnes is president of Crystal Mountain. She is also active in state, local and industry organizations.

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