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## Engaging with nature : Nature affords well-being for families and young people in Finland

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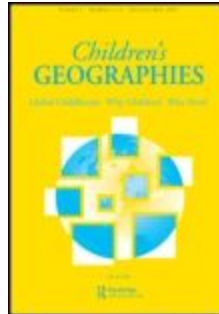
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**Engaging with nature: nature affords well-being for families  
and young people in Finland**

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## Engaging with nature: nature affords well-being for families and young people in Finland

Contact with nature is increasingly being recognized as contributing to humans' mental and physical health. This study explores how Finnish children, young people and families engage with nature during outdoor recreation. We apply a relational approach with the concept of affordance to understand better how engagement with nature affects their well-being. The study is based on thematic writings of 15–21 year-olds and on an ethnographic study of camping. Findings indicate that engagement with nature enables young people to calm down and to get away from the pressures of everyday life and affords close interaction for families. The relational approach makes visible that the more young people and families spend time in nature, the more they are able to perceive affordances that enhance their well-being. In future research and policy the focus should be on how to support families' engagement with nature by securing time and places for encountering nature.

Keywords: affordance; relationality; well-being; children; young people; outdoor recreation

### Introduction

In urbanized societies, natural environments are increasingly valued for the aesthetic experiences they afford, and the public use of areas with a high degree of naturalness has generally changed from one of subsistence to that of recreation (Lindhagen and Hörnsten 2000). The everyday embodied experience of the environment changes when one does not need to work in heating or light, or to deal with waste (Hitchings 2011a). Younger generations' capacities to connect with natural areas in everyday life have diminished, and the general western trend has been a shift away from spontaneous nature-based play towards planned, organized and adult-controlled activities, which often take place in purpose-built facilities (Skar and Krogh 2009).

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3 At the same time, contact with nature is increasingly being recognized as  
4 contributing to our psychological, physiological, and social well-being and health  
5 (Kabisch, van den Bosch, and Laforteza 2017; Keniger et al. 2013). It has been found  
6 that spending longer times in nature – especially spending a night in a nature area –  
7 increases the perceived well-being benefits, in particular psychological well-being  
8 (Puhakka, Pitkänen, and Siikamäki 2017). Interacting with nature has been shown to  
9 increase self-esteem and mood, reduce anger, and improve general psychological well-  
10 being with positive effects on emotions and behavior (Kaplan, 2001; Kuo and Sullivan  
11 2001; Maller 2009). Green spaces are restorative and contribute to attentional recovery  
12 and reducing mental fatigue (Kaplan 2001). Exposure to nature settings has also  
13 positive effects on concentration, academic performance, and the ability to perform  
14 mentally challenging tasks (Hartig, Mang, and Evans 1991; van den Berg, Koole, and  
15 van der Wulp 2003). Furthermore, performing activities in green areas has been found  
16 to alleviate symptoms in children suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder  
17 (ADHD) (Kuo and Taylor 2004). In terms of physiological benefits, contact with green  
18 space alleviates the negative effects of various stressors in urban environments  
19 (Tyrväinen et al. 2014; van den Berg, Koole, and van der Wulp 2003) and encourages  
20 people to exercise (Kaczynski and Henderson 2007). Contact with diverse  
21 environmental microbiota also affects the human commensal microbiota and drives  
22 effective immunoregulation that persists into adulthood (e.g. Hanski et al. 2012).

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25 In terms of social well-being, natural environments and shared nature  
26 experiences provide an opportunity for social interaction and strengthening bonds  
27 within families and communities. Most beneficial for well-being is interacting with  
28 known others, such as family and friends (Dinnie, Brown, and Morris 2013). Compared  
29 to an indoor environment, communication between parents and their little children was  
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3 found to be much more responsive and connected in natural environment, in a city  
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5 centre park, which may constitute optimal environment for communication (Cameron-  
6  
7 Faulkner, Melville, and Gattis, 2018). Nature can also help in personal and community  
8  
9 identity formation, social activity and social participation (Keniger et al. 2013; Kuo and  
10  
11 Sullivan 2001; Maller 2009). For instance, gardens offer various affordances that catch  
12  
13 children's attention easily and make learning social skills effortless for them: manners  
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15 in which to behave and regard other people, along with the possibilities of building  
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17 friendships and affections, confidence, and work ethics (Laaksoharju, Rappe, and  
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19 Kaivola, 2012).

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24 This study contributes to the discussion on how interaction with nature enhances  
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26 well-being by introducing a relational approach to the interaction. We apply the concept  
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28 of 'affordance' (Gibson 1979) to analyze how nature as a recreational environment  
29  
30 affects well-being among families and youths in Finland. We are interested in the  
31  
32 encounters that take place between young people and the recreational environment –  
33  
34 and families and the recreational environment. Hence, we understand nature and  
35  
36 humans as emerging in interaction, and we consider this relational emergence a central  
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38 feature, which should be better recognized when the interconnections between well-  
39  
40 being and nature are discussed. The relational approach to the concept of affordance  
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42 helps to address the emergence analytically.  
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47 In a broad sense, well-being is understood to comprise two main elements:  
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49 feeling good and functioning well (Muirhead 2011; see Dinnie, Brown, and Morris  
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51 2013). In this study, well-being is approached inductively, based on the empirical data,  
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53 and understood very openly. The empirical data consists of thematic writings written by  
54  
55 Finnish 15–21-year-olds youth and of an ethnographic data related to Finnish children,  
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57 young people and families who engage in camping and sleeping outdoors. In Finland,  
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3 cities are still largely embedded in natural environments, and 'everyman's right' gives  
4 everyone the basic right to roam freely in the countryside, to camp for a short period as  
5 well as to pick berries and mushrooms. In the Finnish National Outdoor Recreation  
6 Demand Inventory (LUKE 2010), outdoor recreation refers to all activities which  
7 include moving, staying or doing things in natural environment in order to recreate in  
8 leisure time. Also spending time at recreational home and tourism, as far as they include  
9 these activities, are included in outdoor recreation. In Finland, proximity to a forest and  
10 water is an essential element of a summer cottage, and access to a cottage has been  
11 found out to increase the rate of participation in outdoor recreation and traditional  
12 activities (Sievänen, Pouta, and Neuvonen 2007). On the basis of the national inventory  
13 (LUKE 2010), over 96% of the Finnish population participate in outdoor recreation, the  
14 most common activities being walking, biking, and spending time at recreational home.  
15 Compared to older age groups, youth favor activities that demand physical skills and/or  
16 special equipment (e.g. climbing, mountain biking, downhill skiing) and are motorized  
17 (e.g. motor boats, snowmobiles). Many traditional activities, such as hunting, fishing,  
18 and cross-country skiing, have lost their importance among youths.

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40 By applying the relational approach to the context of Finnish outdoor recreation,  
41 our aim is to bring fore findings that can be taken into account when planning how to  
42 enhance engagement with nature among youth and children.  
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### 48 **Relational approach to affordances**

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51 James Gibson's concept of affordance is well established in the field of ecological and  
52 environmental psychology (Brymer, Davids, and Mallabon 2014). The concept points to  
53 the possibilities and restrictions emerging from the environment, which are perceived as  
54 functionally meaningful units – for example, as surfaces to be climbed (Gibson 1979;  
55 Kyttä 2003). Within the ontology and epistemology of the concept, the immediate  
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3 interaction between the environment and the perceiver is central: it is easier for an  
4 individual to perceive affordances than separate qualities of the environment because  
5 affordances are meaningful entities (Gibson 1994[1977]). Affordances are seen as being  
6 relational and varying, and they depend on situational and physical circumstances as  
7 well as individual urges and capabilities (Laaksoharju and Rappe 2017; Rietveld and  
8 Kiverstein 2014). Thus, the process of perception is relative to the embodied skills and  
9 capacities of the perceiver (Gibson 1994[1977]). Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014)  
10 describe this as being attuned towards the material things around us – within the form of  
11 life in which we are engaged.  
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24 Even though affordances are relative to the skills and capacities, Rietveld and  
25 Kiverstein (2014, 337, 343) suggest that affordances are not relative to the abilities of a  
26 particular individual who perceive or detects the affordance, but that the affordances  
27 have an existence that is relative to the skills available in a specific sociocultural  
28 practice – that is, affordances are relative to the abilities available in a form of life as a  
29 whole. Furthermore, they suggest that we should not limit engagement with affordances  
30 to specific set of motor skills, but instead we should recognize that the variety of  
31 affordances available to us humans is as rich and varied as the sociocultural practices in  
32 which we are engaged into as human beings.  
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44 The concept of affordance has also been discussed in the fields of social  
45 sciences, human geography and anthropology, in relation to the actor network theory  
46 and practice theory (Bærenholdt 2012; Rantala, Valtonen, and Markuksela 2011).  
47 Especially Ingold (2000) has developed Gibson's concept of affordance with a  
48 phenomenological approach that has been influential in the later applications of the  
49 concept. According to Ingold (2000, 168), Gibson assumed that the perceiver moves  
50 around a world that is somehow pre-prepared with all its affordances ready. Ingold  
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3 highlights that from the phenomenological standpoint “the world emerges with its  
4 properties alongside the emergence of the perceiver in person, against the background  
5 of involved activity” (Ingold 2000, 168). For example, in their study of curious play,  
6 Gurholt and Sanderud (2016) analyze children as discovering themselves in relation to  
7 their surrounding through dwelling the landscape and through being active participants  
8 in their own life-world. Accordingly, Bærenholdt (2012) believes that the strength of  
9 the concept of affordance stems from the possibility of a sensuous and bodily research  
10 approach. By applying a relational, sensuous approach, we can address the role of  
11 enskilment (‘the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by  
12 environmentally situated agents’ – Ingold 2000, 5), customary knowledge, and dynamic  
13 engagement that take place when affordances are perceived (Ingold 2011, 11-12).

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The relational approach to affordances highlights the dynamic interaction, appreciates children as active beings, and recognizes their attentiveness to their surrounding non-human world (Rautio 2013). Hence, the dynamic perspective focuses on the simultaneous emergence of the perceiver, the perception of the affordance, and the affordance itself. Attention is paid to the relational aspects of the process of perceiving the affordances, such as the role of enskilment, abilities and motivations (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014) and the role of pre-reflexive bodily sensing that is highlighted in children’s relationships with their surroundings (Gurholt and Sanderud 2016). Laaksoharju’s and Rappe’s (2017) examination of experience-based learning with trees illustrated that engagement with trees motivated children to increase their creativity and their handling of the possible tree-related risks on their own. The availability of affordances in the environment and the social interplay were very much interconnected and seemed to support each other. Similarly, by applying a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach, Skar, Gundersen, and O’Brien (2016) were



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2  
3 able to see children's nature contact as a relational interaction, children and nature as  
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5 interacting agents, and the human-nature relationship as a dynamic and emotional  
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7 relation rather than an object and subject relation.  
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10 Here, we apply a relational approach to affordances in order to pay attention to  
11  
12 how relationships between young people, children and families and their surroundings  
13  
14 are formed in processes of mundane living (Rautio 2013) that take part in outdoor living  
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16 context.  
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### 19 20 **Materials and methods**

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22 We use two data sets to analyze how children, young people and families interact with  
23  
24 nature during outdoor recreation and how the interaction affects their well-being. Our  
25  
26 secondary data originates from our two studies that were not originally gathered to  
27  
28 study affordances and well-being (XXX 2014; XXX 2014; XXX 2019 masked for blind  
29  
30 review). When analyzing engagement with nature in these studies and discussing the  
31  
32 findings together, we became aware of the aspects related to well-being in data cases  
33  
34 and wanted to analyze these insights further. The different quality of the data sets –  
35  
36 thematic writings and an ethnographic data – seemed to supplement each other.  
37  
38 Therefore, this paper combines two data sets in order to tease out the dynamic  
39  
40 emergence of well-being issues when analyzing engagement with nature. Our study is  
41  
42 an example of amplified analysis in which 'researchers who separately conducted  
43  
44 independent studies later performed an analysis of the two data sets to further explore  
45  
46 common and/or divergent issues across two study populations' (Heaton 2004, 47). We  
47  
48 followed the guidelines for assessing the re-usability of qualitative data sets and took  
49  
50 into consideration quality and suitability of our previous data sets (Heaton 2004, 92;  
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52 Hinds et al. 1997).  
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3 First case consists of thematic writings of 15–21-year-olds living in the city of  
4 Lahti with over 100 000 inhabitants and in the surrounding area in southern Finland.  
5  
6 The young people were asked to answer open-ended, thematic questions and one  
7  
8 structured question about their frequency of participation in 21 outdoor activities during  
9  
10 summer and 11 activities during winter (i.e. 'How often do you participate in the  
11  
12 following activities during summertime/wintertime? Please circle the alternative that  
13  
14 best describes your participation'). Respondents' sex, year of birth, municipality of  
15  
16 residence, and house type were also enquired. The thematic questions covered five  
17  
18 broad themes: 1) leisure time and favorite places, 2) perception of nature, 3) leisure time  
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20 in natural environments and motives for spending/not spending time in nature, 4) most  
21  
22 preferred natural environments and elements, and 5) nature-related skills and knowledge  
23  
24 learned from previous generations. Moreover, the young people were asked to write or  
25  
26 draw their most precious memory of nature (drawings not included in this paper). The  
27  
28 length of the responses to each theme varied from one word to over half a page written  
29  
30 by hand. The data was collected in 2013 from pupils of two schools: a Rudolf Steiner  
31  
32 school and a vocational school. The respondents (N=184) were born between 1992 and  
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34 1998, and over two thirds (69%) of them were female.  
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42 In order to gain deeper access to relational engagement with affordances and the  
43  
44 dynamic emergence of the participants, nature and well-being, we use a secondary data  
45  
46 from a research project that focused on practices of sleeping outdoors. A larger  
47  
48 ethnographic data was collected, of which those parts that included families and young  
49  
50 people were reanalyzed for the study at hand. This data consists of the first author's  
51  
52 autoethnographic field notes from camping with her family in northern Finland and  
53  
54 northern Norway in summer 2011 and 2015, participant observations from visiting 27  
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3 young scouts camping in snow caves in northern Finland in spring 2012, and a focus  
4  
5 group discussion with four camping mothers in northern Finland, in spring 2012.  
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8           The participant observations with the scouts were produced both during the  
9  
10 meetings before the camp and during the camp – by the first author visiting the camp  
11  
12 for 24 hours, engaging in the activities with scouts, through informal discussion, and by  
13  
14 sleeping in a tent next to the camp. The focus group discussion focused on practices of  
15  
16 the mothers who camp often with their family. By camping, we refer to overnight stays  
17  
18 in simplified outdoor settings – either along hiking or skiing routes, in forests and fells,  
19  
20 or sleeping in a tent alongside a road. The ethnographic data captures the various  
21  
22 practices of young people and families spending time in nature with rhythms of being  
23  
24 outdoors. Within analytical ethnographic paradigm, the core idea is that the researcher  
25  
26 is a full member in the research group or setting, conducts critical reflexivity throughout  
27  
28 the research process – when producing the data, when analyzing it, and when producing  
29  
30 thick description in the form of research articles and reports – and is committed to  
31  
32 developing theoretical understandings of a broader social phenomena (Anderson 2006;  
33  
34 Foley 2002). The data production and the analytical interpretation of the ethnographic  
35  
36 data is seen as an intertwined process, where the corporeal and sensual encountering of  
37  
38 the life-world forms a central part of the researcher's knowledge production process  
39  
40 (Vannini 2015).  
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46           We analyzed the data by applying the relational approach – that is, by paying  
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48 attention to the dynamics of encountering nature and to the interplay between young  
49  
50 people and the environment and between families and the environment. We interpreted  
51  
52 our data collectively in order to avoid missing any relevant contextual information or  
53  
54 epistemological viewpoints related to the original research contexts that could lead to  
55  
56 misinterpretation of the data (see van den Berg 2005 and Moore 2007 on the reuse of  
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3 data), and to reflect continuously on the interplay between our relational approach and  
4  
5 the insights arising from the empirical data. The analysis focused on the perception of  
6  
7 the affordances, and on the simultaneous emergence of the affordance and the perceiver  
8  
9 itself. The analysis process can be seen as a process of (re)constructing the data  
10  
11 (Hammersley 2010) with the help of the relational approach, in which case applying  
12  
13 information from the original research context is relevant, especially since the role of  
14  
15 the researcher is thoroughly intertwined in the analytical, autoethnographic  
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17 ethnographic research process. This is also relevant in our case where we focused on the  
18  
19 relational processes of emergence.  
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23  
24 Based on our collective interpretation, we next introduce (1) affordances related  
25  
26 to outdoor recreation that affect well-being, and then discuss the relational process of  
27  
28 emergence by focusing on both (2) the materiality of the environment in which the  
29  
30 outdoor recreation takes place and on (3) the enskilment of the young people, children  
31  
32 and families on perceiving the affordances related to well-being. The affordance  
33  
34 approach has been critiqued for not being able to bring the material agency itself into  
35  
36 the studies (see Merewether 2019, 107). In our analysis process, the intention was to  
37  
38 pay particular attention to the emergence of the material environment in the dynamic  
39  
40 process, but we acknowledge the analysis process being more human-centric.  
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#### 46 **Affordances related to outdoor recreation**

##### 47 48 49 *Thematic writings*

50  
51 Nature affords various activities for young people, as indicated by the responses to the  
52  
53 structured question about participation in outdoor recreation. In summertime, the most  
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55 popular activities were sunbathing and spending time at the lakeside or in nature, and  
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57 swimming in natural waters; over half of the young respondents participated in these  
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3 activities weekly. Furthermore, approximately 40% of the respondents visited cottages  
4  
5 in the countryside or boated monthly. During wintertime, the participation rates were  
6  
7 considerably lower; around a fifth of the respondents visited cottage or photographed  
8  
9 nature monthly. The thematic writings provided further information on outdoor  
10  
11 recreation. The most common activities, mentioned by almost two thirds, were walking,  
12  
13 jogging and spending time in nature. Almost 40% of the young respondents considered  
14  
15 nature important, while nature was only somewhat important for half of them, and not at  
16  
17 all important for a tenth. Those who considered nature important participated in more  
18  
19 outdoor activities than the others. However, some people considered nature important  
20  
21 although they did not participate in special outdoor activities.  
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27 I do not like to spend time in nature because there is nothing to do in the forest and it is  
28  
29 more unsafe in places in which there are not many people. --- In spring it is lovely to  
30  
31 listen to birdsong and the sound of gurgling water. I also like to watch little birds. Apple  
32  
33 trees are important because in summer I swing in the yard, and in autumn you can eat  
34  
35 the apples. (Thematic writing 4, female, 15 years old)

36 When asked the motives for spending time in nature, young people more often  
37  
38 mentioned emotional engagement with nature and psychological benefits than physical  
39  
40 activities. Young people spent time in nature because it, for instance, afforded  
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42 relaxation, restoration, increased energy and improved concentration, which have been  
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44 identified as important aspects of well-being.  
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49 Exercising and especially exercising outdoors is quite important for me because you can  
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51 stay in peace outdoors and it is easier to think about issues. Concentrating on things is  
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53 sometimes extremely difficult and that is why I usually go outdoors before reading to  
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55 exam. (Thematic writing 63, female, 16 years old)  
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3 Nature also helped increase young people's self-esteem and improve hope about  
4  
5 tomorrow. These kinds of emotional and psychological benefits may have wide-ranging  
6  
7 positive effects on young people's everyday life.  
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10  
11 My relationship with nature has improved lately. It has become quite an important  
12 part of my life. It helps me cope with my minor illness and to believe in the future.  
13 I have really learned to enjoy it during the last year. It has given me the chance to  
14 think about values and my own characteristics. Now I appreciate myself more.  
15  
16 (Thematic writing 56, female, 16 years old)  
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21 The thematic writings indicated young people's need for both places of social  
22 interaction during leisure and places of retreat, where it is possible to avoid other  
23 people. When the respondents wrote about their leisure time in general, two thirds of  
24 them mentioned friends, over a tenth family members or a girl/boyfriend, and only a  
25 few wrote that they spend leisure time alone. However, when the respondents described  
26 their time spent in natural environments, less than a tenth wrote about friends or family  
27 members.  
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37 I spend time in nature at our summer cottage. I think the cottage environment has  
38 to be peaceful and far away from everything 'city', and no neighbors should be  
39 close by. When I was hiking, I liked 'the wilderness life' when you did not really  
40 have to think about anything and you could look as you wanted. I like to be in  
41 nature and outdoors, when I only have time. It refreshes me and I sleep better. If  
42 you stay only inside, you feel tired all the time. (Thematic writing 164, female, 19  
43 years old)  
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### 50 ***Ethnographic data***

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52 The ethnographic data related to camping and sleeping outdoors formed a context which  
53 highlighted the activities related to spending longer times in nature – such as scout  
54 camps, sleeping in a tent or open hut, and hiking and skiing trips. These activities  
55 enable learning skills in handling equipment related to outdoor life, learning about  
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3 seasonal rhythms and different weather conditions, and learning how these affect living  
4 outdoors. The mothers in the focus group discussion and the instructor from the scout  
5 camp talked about being involved in basic activities: making food and preparing camp,  
6 washing dishes and spending time with friends and family.  
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13 Mother 1: It is about basic activities. One does not need to overload the brain all the  
14 time. (Laughs) It is just great. It is exactly about washing dishes with snow, as you  
15 (Mother 2) described, and other things that are psychically easy. It is great when you  
16 can just perform those activities.  
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20 Mother 2: Yes, I think it is in a way Finnish meditation, being in nature. There is no  
21 extra work for your brain, you can clean what you have there or just be without  
22 thinking.  
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26 Mother 3: Yes, exactly. There is not too many stimulus. And probably that is one reason  
27 why one sleeps well in nature. (Focus group discussion)  
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31 Outdoor life affords families' and young people's engagement in basic everyday  
32 activities at a slower rhythm than that in the daily environment, as well as learning how  
33 to carry out these activities in an outdoor environment. This furthermore enables  
34 intensive engagement with both one's companions and the environment.  
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40 Intensive engagement with family or with one's group afforded by camping life  
41 was illustrated in many ways. Scouts described how they learn how others like to fall  
42 asleep in a snow cave: one friend wants to turn around many times in the sleeping bag,  
43 another likes silence. One of the mothers said that when spending time in a tent,  
44 children seem to be at the center – they get attention more easily. Hence, getting away  
45 from work, normal routines and everyday worries enables relaxation, restoration and  
46 strengthens bonds within families, at the same time also improving motivation for  
47 everyday life.  
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3 Nature also affords sleeping the whole night – the first author noted several  
4  
5 times in her autoethnographic field notes that the children slept much better in the tent.  
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9 Kids love being out. They were happy to have few days in cabin, but when we are  
10 camping in the wild, they do not stop playing the whole evening. They have some  
11 difficulty in calming down in the tent – it is so tempting to roll around, but once they  
12 fall asleep they really sleep!!! (This they do not do very often at home – sleeping a  
13 whole night without waking up.) (Field notes, Camping trip 2015)  
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17  
18 In the everyday life of a family with small children, getting enough sleep can become a  
19 central issue in terms of well-being. Similarly, the camping mothers described how  
20 nature affords calming down in the evening; a few families had transferred this to their  
21 everyday home life and had candles or fewer lights in the evening to calm the children  
22 before going to sleep. Staying overnight in nature seems to enhance the well-being of  
23 families by enabling them to pay attention to the rhythms of sleep and to issues that  
24 make it possible to adjust life to the family's own rhythms.  
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35 Finally, we find a nice place away from the road a bit, along a smaller bumpy road.  
36 Not a perfect spot, but good in this kind of sunny weather. No other people, a  
37 waterfall, a clean eating place, and a place to make a fire. The kids like it here –  
38 when there is space around – since they can play without needing to hear too many  
39 warnings and 'don'ts': don't step on the tent, don't throw things there, and don't  
40 ride your bike there. Also, I like it when I don't need to be worried that our noise is  
41 bothering other people. (Field notes, Camping trip 2015)  
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48 Generally, outdoor living affords having less things around, which may result in  
49 children using their imagination and materials from nature when playing. It affords  
50 young people to sleep late in the dark, silent snow cave, with no computers and phones  
51 available all the time. According to the instructor of the scout camp, one of the most  
52 important reasons for organizing the camp is “to get the young ones away from  
53 computers to experience other kind of life”. Having less things enables families and  
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3 young people to organize things with a rhythm that is 'natural' to them, or with a  
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5 rhythm that fits the 'form of life' (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014) that they are currently  
6  
7 living.  
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## 10 **Encountering nature**

### 11 *Thematic writings*

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17 The material properties of the natural world support diverse affordances and enable  
18  
19 enhancing well-being. According to the thematic writings, the most preferred natural  
20  
21 environments were the forest and lakesides, but the young people also mentioned other  
22  
23 places such as the surroundings of the summer cottage, water areas and parks. Over a  
24  
25 quarter of the respondents wrote about their favorite places. Almost half of them told  
26  
27 that their favorite place was located in nature, the shore of a lake for instance, or a hill  
28  
29 in the forest, or a rock by a lake.  
30  
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33  
34 Due to everyman's right, natural environment can be quite easily encountered  
35  
36 near the home even in more densely populated southern Finland. Nature located close to  
37  
38 the young respondents' homes was most often the forest, but other environments such  
39  
40 as water areas and lakesides, yards, jogging/skiing tracks and parks were also  
41  
42 mentioned. Only less than a tenth of the respondents wrote that there was not (enough)  
43  
44 accessible nature close to their homes. Of natural areas visited farther away from home,  
45  
46 a summer cottage and its surroundings were most often mentioned. Certain nature areas  
47  
48 afford diverse activities – for instance, a lakeside affords sunbathing and swimming –  
49  
50 but even the smallest, or invisible properties of nature may play an important role in  
51  
52 enabling the encountering of affordances. Environmental features may signify a  
53  
54 connection between people and nature, and according to O'Brien, Morris, and Stewart  
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3 (2014), this awareness and experience is beneficial in terms of perceived health and  
4  
5 well-being.  
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9 Nature is important to me, and it's nice to run or walk in the forest, to look at small  
10 pink twinflowers, to listen to birdsong and to embrace spruces which rise  
11 majestically towards the sky. There is so much life around me in nature, which  
12 does not attack you, so I think it is very precious. Because nature is a reflection of  
13 another world, and in nature this 'secret world', with its invisible parts, is close to  
14 humans. (Thematic writing 72, female, 18 years old)  
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20 The thematic writings indicated that well-being is often related to affordances that  
21 enable pleasant sensations and embodied experiences such as listening to silence or the  
22 sounds of nature, breathing in fresh air, smelling or feeling nature, or enjoying visually  
23 beautiful scenery.  
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30 In the backyard, it is nice to sit in the rocking chair and look at the apple tree just burst  
31 into bloom and the flowers planted by mom. Sometimes the neighbor's black cat sits on  
32 my lap and sleeps there. A nice place. Birdsong is priceless. Our little apple tree looks  
33 beautiful. When water is beating against the shore at the cottage, nothing beats it.  
34  
35 (Thematic writing 95, male, 19 years old)  
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39  
40 Environmental features may also restrict perceiving affordances related to well-being.  
41  
42 When asked about motives for spending/not spending time in nature, less than 15% of  
43 the young respondents wrote about the negative aspects of nature such as insects/bugs,  
44 weather conditions, snakes or allergens. The restrictive role of climatic conditions was  
45 also illustrated by lower participation rates in outdoor recreation in winter. The other  
46 restrictive features attached to natural environments were dangers caused by other  
47 people (e.g. rapes), boredom and lack of interest.  
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56 I do not spend much time in nature during leisure time. I do not feel it is necessary  
57 to go and stand alone or in company in the forest, and mountain biking or picking  
58 mushrooms or berries is not for me. (Thematic writing 58, male, 16 years old)  
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### *Ethnographic data*

In the ethnographic data the role of weather and seasons was apparent in relation to when to go camping and what was done while camping. For example, camping trips with small children were planned at times when there would not be so many mosquitoes and when it would not yet be very cold. The participants at the scout camp also vividly described what it means to camp in a cold environment: you wake up in the night and it is cold, all your clothes are cold when you need to change, and even your candies are cold. The coldness affords campers to appreciate the easiness of everyday life but does not seem to prevent them from returning – many scouts had participated in the same snow cave camp in previous years. However, support gained from more experienced scouts was important for perceiving diverse affordances.

The instructor from the scout camp tells me that the hard work related to digging the caves affords the younger ones to test their limits. They have informed the parents that the trip will be intense and harsh but that the participants will get help when they meet their limits. This help is not offered straight away, but after the 'first crying'. (Field notes, Scout camp)

After the first day at scout camp, many of the young people were very tired and a bit hungry when they went to bed. They had felt cold and had not slept well. This is something that the mothers also discussed in their focus group – outdoor living teaches people to estimate the impact of weather and outdoor conditions on their practices. In cold or rainy weather, things might take longer than in sunny weather. In cold weather, one needs to carry out practices in a more effective way.

Mother 4: I have been thinking about this – how much more people would get out of their experiences in nature if different perceptions on time were brought up – different time than clock-time. Those who are experienced in acting in nature know that two hours can mean very different things depending on the conditions of that moment. Depending on amount of day light, on season... (Focus group discussion)

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3 Learning how to carry out practices in different kinds of seasonal and weather  
4 conditions – or in specific places, enables diversification of the ways how nature is  
5 encountered, which furthermore affects the perception of affordances related to gaining  
6 well-being.  
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### 13 **Dynamic engagement with nature**

#### 14 *Thematic writings*

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16  
17 From the perspective of enskilment, abilities and motivations, social interaction within  
18 families plays an important role in the perception of affordances. Over 70% of the  
19 young respondents who engaged in outdoor recreation and considered nature important,  
20 had learned nature-related skills and knowledge from their close ones, mainly from  
21 parents and grandparents. Of those who did not consider nature important, less than half  
22 had learned nature-related skills and knowledge from previous generations. Young  
23 people had been engaged in how to become active participants in surrounding outdoors  
24 when time was spent together in a natural environment – often at a summer cottage.  
25 Older generations had engaged young people in skills and knowledge related to, for  
26 instance, hiking and surviving in the wilderness, fishing, hunting, boating, berry and  
27 mushroom picking, forest work and gardening, but also in the recognition of species,  
28 appreciation of nature, and rules of how to behave in nature. When young people grow  
29 older, they continue learning and developing these outdoor skills, which may have a  
30 wide-ranging effect on their everyday life (e.g. career choice) and further affect their  
31 ability and enskilment to perceive diverse affordances.  
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55 Since I was a kid I have been taught to respect nature and appreciate its beauty. I  
56 have been taken fishing, berry picking, and mushroom picking. I have learned to  
57 recognize fish, berry, and mushroom species. Maybe that's why I have become  
58 interested in food? (Thematic writing 84, male, 19 years old)  
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Moreover, parents or grandparents engage young people in perceiving affordances by telling stories about natural environments. Previous generations were also mentioned in the writings about the most precious nature memories; the young people described time spent together with grandparents or parents in childhood. These memories highlighted that being outdoors in nature increased well-being through pleasant and satisfactory sensations; embodied experiences of nature are memorable.

When I was a child, I used to spend a night at my grandmother's summer cottage with my brother at least once a summer. We went fishing along the stream and swimming in the pond. I also remember that we picked wild strawberries near the cottage and ate them with vanilla ice cream. This is one of my most precious nature memories. (Thematic writing 159, female, 19 years old)

### ***Ethnographic data***

The emergence of the perceiver in person was illustrated in the ethnographic data especially when the growth and development of skills of the children and young people was articulated – either by their parents and companions or in the form of shared memories (the growth was also evident because the first author had field notes from time when her first child was born and from time when the child was four year old). It is evident that young people and children are in the process of emergence as perceivers. For example, the development of skills was visualized when discussing the distances or the affordances that children perceive at each age. A baby was described as lying in a tent, wondering at the red color filtered through the fabric, whereas four-year old rolled around the tent in woolen underwear enjoying the soft, safe world. Children were first carried in the back carrier, then walked or skied small distances, and later carried their own backpacks. Thus, nature affords perceiving the dynamics that take place within the family as children grow up.

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3 The dynamic process was also illustrated when mothers discussed how learning  
4 to dress their children in accordance with the weather conditions, or learning what kind  
5 of trip fits each stage of life, enables them to enjoy their time in nature. Learning from  
6 experience enabled them to perceive more affordances that affect well-being. The  
7 instructors in the scout camp also recounted how young campers are first allowed to try  
8 things themselves, and when they have met their limit, they receive help. Thus, the  
9 human – nature encounter forms a dynamic process because the person changes when  
10 learning new skills and developing more strengths (or when dressing better), and  
11 because the conditions in nature change.  
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24 Furthermore, the data illustrated that it takes some time to get into the rhythm of  
25 nature and this affects how nature is encountered. It takes a few days to leave the  
26 everyday hustle and bustle behind and get into the tempo of living outdoors.  
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31 After the evening snack and warm drink, we had a nice evening walk at the beach,  
32 and now we are finally in the tent. We are still getting into the mood of moving and  
33 being in the open air, not there yet. (Field notes, Camping trip 2015)  
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38 The dynamic process of 'being-in-the-world' becomes visible in the feelings  
39 experienced during camping – both relaxed, frustrating and scary moments are  
40 experienced. Accepting the dynamics that atmospheres change quickly due to hunger,  
41 tiredness, weather and mosquitos is one part of outdoor living and dynamic engagement  
42 with affordances. It takes some time to get accustomed to this. However, when the  
43 dynamics are accepted, these observations can be used in everyday environments to  
44 enhance well-being by, for example, becoming aware of hunger or tiredness more easily  
45 or by accepting the changes in atmospheres and realizing how one can affect these  
46 changes.  
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## Discussion

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3 Our findings showed that young people, children and families engage with recreational  
4 environments in diverse ways that affect their well-being. Most young people  
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6 emphasize the importance of nature; natural environments enable various activities and  
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8 meeting up with friends, but also support retreat behaviors by affording privacy,  
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10 freedom from the pressures of friends and everyday life, and calming down and  
11  
12 enjoying oneself (see Kyttä 2003; O'Brien, Morris, and Stewart 2014; Laaksoharju and  
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14 Rappe 2017). Our data also suggested that spending time with family in natural  
15  
16 environment is valued. When engaging longer times with nature, young people, children  
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18 and families are able to spend intensive time together and to conduct daily practices in  
19  
20 different rhythm than in an everyday life. Outdoor recreation seems to enable young  
21  
22 people and families to perceive possibilities to do things differently and gives them  
23  
24 space for expressing different emotions and for developing diverse skills. It is this  
25  
26 possibility, or extra space, that especially affects their well-being. Earlier studies (e.g.  
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28 Gurholt and Sanderud 2016) have also highlighted that children are active participants  
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30 in their life-words and that engagement with the surrounding natural environment is a  
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32 dynamic process. However, in order to support engagement with nature and an active  
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34 relationship to develop, time and places for encounters are needed.  
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42 Rautio (2013) has invited children's geographers to become more aware of the  
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44 diversity of ways in which children engage with nature and are part of it. She points out  
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46 that children apply an openness towards their material surroundings. Our findings  
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48 showed that this kind of openness needs to be practiced and recognized – children and  
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50 young people become skilled in engaging with the natural environment through practice  
51  
52 and through perceiving possibilities for engagement.  
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56 Both individual families and society can support engagement with nature and  
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58 gaining well-being benefits. Our findings showed that the role of free time spent  
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3 together with the family in nature areas is very important for the perception of  
4 affordances. For example at summer cottages or camping trips, nature-related skills are  
5 practiced and knowledge produced together by different generations, and children and  
6 young people may become active participants in their own life-worlds. However, the  
7 role of school and daycare centres has been recently highlighted due to unequal  
8 opportunities of families to ensure engagement with nature. In Finland, children and  
9 youth are supported to engage with nature in diverse ways, for instance by organizing  
10 forest trips and teaching outdoor activities such as orienteering and cross-country skiing  
11 at school. However, innovative nature-based activities, events and campaigns should be  
12 developed for young people and their wide-scale participation in various hobbies  
13 supported. Outdoor courses or family clubs could support learning outdoor skills and  
14 encouraging families to spend time in natural environment also on their own.

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31 Interaction within families affects individual urges and capabilities, but the  
32 perception of affordances also depends on situational and physical circumstances. Our  
33 findings showed significantly lower rates of participation in outdoor activities during  
34 the winter among the young people living in southern Finland, where snow-and ice-  
35 deficient winters have increased. At the same time, the camping mothers living in  
36 northern Finland often mentioned winter activities. In Finland, climatic conditions have  
37 traditionally afforded different kinds of outdoor activities during snowy wintertime  
38 compared to summer. However, lack of snow or ice coverage on water areas, cold or  
39 wet weather, darkness or slippery conditions may restrict perceiving affordances. The  
40 absence of snow affects not only sport activities such as cross-country skiing but also  
41 the tradition of playing with and building from snow.

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56 It would be worth investigating more closely how the changing seasonal  
57 conditions affect the availability of affordances related to being outdoors and learning to  
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3 perceive new affordances – becoming skilled in acting in the changed seasonal  
4  
5 conditions. Hence, climate change and its impacts on physical circumstances are crucial  
6  
7 from the perspective of outdoor recreation (Nicholls 2006). The impacts of climate  
8  
9 change may be mitigated by using adaptation strategies such as making artificial snow  
10  
11 in skiing centers, but these kinds of strategies may have no effect on the possibilities for  
12  
13 daily outdoor activities near young people's homes. Instead, paying more attention to  
14  
15 learning to adapt one's practices to diverse seasonal conditions might be more  
16  
17 beneficial (see Hitchings 2011b). For instance in flexibly organized sports activities, the  
18  
19 timing is not fixed beforehand, but children's activities are determined on the basis of  
20  
21 the seasonal conditions and weather. In fact, some recent forms of outdoor recreation  
22  
23 that are suitable for various climatic conditions (e.g. fatbiking, geocaching) have  
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25 increased their popularity.  
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31 In regard to the places for encounters, our findings showed that forest and  
32  
33 lakeside areas were the most preferred natural environments for the young people. In  
34  
35 our ethnographic data, the benefits of spending longer times in simplified outdoor  
36  
37 settings were illustrated by, for instance, improved ability to perceive both the rhythms  
38  
39 of nature, personal rhythms and the dynamics between these, which gradually expanded  
40  
41 after staying outdoors for a few days. The findings suggest that it is important to not  
42  
43 only build urban parks and playgrounds but also to preserve more natural environments  
44  
45 that attract children to play and spend unstructured time with their families. These areas  
46  
47 close to population centers would support the dynamic relationships between youth,  
48  
49 children and natural environments and becoming skilled in diverse outdoor  
50  
51 environments and eager to visit also the remote natural areas. Natural environments  
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53 have been found to differ in their restorative potential (Han 2010; Puhakka, Pitkänen,  
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3 and Siikamäki 2017). In Finland, there are public transport connections to many  
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5 national parks, and easy accessibility should be further promoted.  
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8           The human-nature interactions as relational and dynamic emergences were  
9  
10 illustrated in our ethnographic data, for example, in relation to getting to know the  
11  
12 impacts of various weather conditions and observing the development of personal skills  
13  
14 related to staying outdoors for longer times (see Ridgers, Knowles, and Sayers 2012).  
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16 Once families learn, for example, to equip themselves according to the weather, the  
17  
18 possibilities related to using the outdoors to gain well-being benefits expand. These  
19  
20 findings draw upon Laaksoharju's and Rappe's (2017) result that the use of affordances  
21  
22 deepens and becomes multifaceted after getting to know a place, yielding connectedness  
23  
24 to a place and finally connectedness to nature. Planning biodiverse, low-maintenance  
25  
26 spaces is recommended, as these will invite children to use green spaces according to  
27  
28 their needs.  
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33           Skar, Gundersen, and O'Brien (2016) highlight the role of free, spontaneous play  
34  
35 as a key to more bodily, emotional and sensuous interaction with nature. In their study,  
36  
37 parents often chose structured outdoor activities and organized events instead of  
38  
39 unorganized family trips, due to easiness and limited time resources. Similarly, our  
40  
41 findings suggest that perceiving possibilities for families and young people to stay  
42  
43 outdoors is a relational process that is intertwined with processes of enskilment and  
44  
45 emergence – and require allowing child-directed, place-based play in nature areas (see  
46  
47 Laaksoharju and Rappe 2017). Enskilment and emergence are not only related to the  
48  
49 cognitive abilities gained when spending time in nature; they are also associated with  
50  
51 the dynamics-related ability to perceive possibilities for emotional engagement.  
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56           Limitations of this study are related to the secondary data sets: two very different  
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58 data sets were combined for the analysis since they were seen to complement each  
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3 other. As the data sets were originally produced for other purposes and in two different  
4 regions in Finland, the analysis remains little fragmented. However, there have been  
5 recent calls for researchers to engage with “messy” research processes and produce, use  
6 and reuse, and analyze the research data in creative ways – also in children’s  
7 geographies (Moore 2007; Rautio 2013). For future research, we recommend producing  
8 creatively data that especially focuses on how children and youth in different areas get  
9 access to the time and places needed for engaging in the processes of emergence with  
10 nature.  
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### 23 **Conclusion**

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25 By applying the relational approach and the concept of affordance, this study indicated  
26 that engagement with nature enables young people to calm down and to get away from  
27 the pressures of everyday life and affords close interaction for families and possibilities  
28 to do things differently. The relational approach makes visible that the more children,  
29 young people and families spend time in nature, the more they are able to perceive  
30 affordances that enhance their well-being. In order for a dynamic relationship to  
31 develop, time and places for encountering nature are needed – especially since time  
32 spent in nature as a child seems to affect how affordances are perceived in teenage and  
33 adulthood. In the future, more emphasis should put on how to support families to  
34 engage with natural environments. Along the development of urban parks, “safe training  
35 environments” – such as summer cottages in Finland – should be secured more widely.  
36  
37 Time and places for engagement with nature should be available throughout the year –  
38 in different seasons and weather conditions, in order for children and young people to  
39 be able to adapt their practices and learn to spend time in diverse seasonal conditions.  
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41 The relational approach illustrates the role of these dynamic aspects well. For instance,  
42 the role of availability and accessibility of natural environments and knowledge of how  
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3 to use the environment are related to each other and vary due to both seasonal changes  
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5 in nature and changes in family dynamics. Rather than seeing young people's and  
6  
7 families' relations with nature as subject-object relations, we need to be more aware of  
8  
9 the diverse ways in which we relate with nature already.  
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