



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH | 2025 POLICY BRIEF

# Examining Latiné Perspectives on Outdoor/Nature-Based Learning

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the George B. Storer Foundation for supporting the development, production, and dissemination of this publication. The mission of the George B. Storer Foundation is to promote an ecologically rich and economically prosperous future for current and future generations. They believe in protecting vital natural resources that support healthy economies, and in equipping and empowering future generations to be strong leaders, engaged citizens, and good stewards of those resources. The opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

In addition, I wish to thank the following individuals for their help in the development of this policy brief: Kate Hodges, Dr. Steve Barnett, and Dr. Alanna Beroiza. Finally, I would like to extend thanks to Sandy Ogilvie for her assistance with the graphic design of the report.

### ABOUT NIEER

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#### *Suggested citation:*

Genao, E. (2025). Examining Latiné perspectives on outdoor/nature-based learning (Policy brief). National Institute for Early Education Research.





## Introduction: Reframing the Question

Latiné individuals represent one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, a demographic shift that includes a significant number of preschool and school-age children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Child Trends, 2014). In parallel, educational trends have seen a marked increase in nature-based learning opportunities, often referred to as Outdoor/Nature-based Learning (ONBL). Yet, as these two trends intersect, it becomes clear that Latiné families face unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to engaging with outdoor learning. This paper explores not just participation rates, but the deeper cultural values, structural conditions, and social dynamics that shape how Latiné families interact with nature. By centering Latiné voices and perspectives, we can begin to understand what meaningful, equitable access to outdoor learning truly looks like—and why it matters.

Discussions on ONBL and the Latiné population should prioritize both equitable access—including the barriers that limit participation—and a deeper understanding of the cultural landscape that shapes whether and how Latiné families engage with the outdoors. Looking at one without the other risks creating programs that are either inaccessible or culturally irrelevant, ultimately limiting their effectiveness and impact. A study by the Outdoor Foundation found that while overall youth outdoor participation has increased, Hispanic participation has not kept pace with demographic growth (Outdoor Foundation, 2018). This suggests that a deeper inquiry is needed. This includes exploring unique cultural perspectives on nature, specific barriers such as safety concerns and time constraints, and how different populations benefit from ONBL. By expanding our perspective to include both program enrollment and cultural specificity, we can more effectively inform policies and practices that are genuinely inclusive and impactful.

## Exploring the Benefits of ONBL

ONBL is a form of environmental education that leverages contact with nature to potentially increase environmental awareness and curiosity (Kellert, 2002). In terms of health and development, research indicates that time spent in nature is associated with increased physical activity and may play a role in mitigating health disparities (Bell et al., 2008). This is particularly relevant given that Latiné children are disproportionately affected by higher obesity rates, a complex issue shaped by a web of socioeconomic, environmental, and biological factors that are “far from definitive” (Anekwe et al., 2020; Caprio et al., 2008). Evidence from a systematic literature review shows that exposure to natural environments is associated with increased physical activity levels and a reduction in obesity, particularly among older children (Gill, 2014). In terms of physical health, outdoor play supports vigorous, large-motor activities that enhance locomotor and fine motor skills, while also contributing to cardiovascular health, improved lung function, muscle and bone strength, and overall physical fitness (Kemple et al., 2016). Some studies suggest that outdoor play can support motor fitness and that natural settings may improve concentration and reduce stress (Pretty et al., 2009; Taylor & Kuo, 2009).

For education, some researchers propose that outdoor settings can stimulate creativity, problem-solving, and more positive attitudes toward school (Powell et al., 2024). Unstructured play outdoors may also foster more complex language use and collaborative social skills, with some studies observing that children in green outdoor settings are more likely to engage in creative and cooperative play (Dyment & Bell, 2008; Pretty et al., 2009). In a small study of 138 elementary school students in Austin, Texas, researchers found positive associations between overall social-emotional learning skills, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills when children felt connected to nature (Lanza et al., 2023). Another study of thirty-four- to eight-year-olds found that children’s play was more collaborative, sustained, and constructive when playing on a natural playground than a traditional playground (Kuh, et al., 2013).







## Benefits of ONBL for Latiné Children

A recent study conducted by Sprague et al. (2020) examined the health and educational outcomes of outdoor nature-based learning (ONBL) interventions for urban Black and Latiné children living in low-income households. The authors found that children from historically marginalized communities often experience disparities in educational and health outcomes, shaped by unequal access to resources and opportunities within the U.S. school system (Sprague et al., 2020).

To examine strategies for addressing these disparities, researchers implemented a 15-week ONBL intervention with 122 urban Black and Latiné children living in low-income households ages ten to fifteen. The intervention included weekly interactive, STEM-focused classroom lessons aligned with academic standards, complemented by monthly outdoor field trips designed to extend and reinforce learning. Facilitated by volunteer undergraduate mentors, the program aimed to foster teamwork, environmental awareness, and improved health-related quality of life while teaching outdoor skills and reshaping students' perceptions of science and sustainability. They observed significant improvements in both STEM capacity and health-related quality of life after the intervention, with overall scores increasing by 44% for Black children and 46% for Latiné children (Sprague et al., 2020). Though small, the study supports the need for further research on the impact of ONBL and STEM capacity and health-related quality of life in urban, Black, and Latiné children living in households with limited economic resources (Sprague et al., 2020).

## Challenges & Insights from Latiné Families

Beginning in Spring 2020, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) launched a series of nationally representative surveys—known as the Preschool Learning Activities (PLA) study—to better understand how families engage in early learning at home, including outdoor play. With over 2,000 respondents from 2023 and 2024, the data revealed stark disparities in access to outdoor environments for Latiné children, reinforcing what other researchers have long observed: race and socioeconomic status are deeply tied to inequities in nature access.

Latiné children are significantly less likely than others (White, Black, and other non-Hispanic children) to live within a 10-minute walk of a forest (26% vs. 42%), an open field (55% vs. 71%), and walking or biking trails (65% vs. 72%). While Latiné children were more likely than others to have access to parks (88% vs. 77%), this does not negate the overall trend of reduced access to diverse natural spaces. These spatial limitations and proximity issues, as noted by other researchers, restrict frequent visits and the potential health benefits associated with nature contact (Gill, 2014; Tandon et al., 2018). This disadvantage can be compounded when transportation or safe travel routes are lacking, making it more difficult for individuals or families to visit natural spaces (Tandon et al., 2018).

Several factors deepen these disparities. Urban planning often neglects low-income communities, resulting in fewer green spaces (Tandon et al., 2018). Language barriers and underinvestment in infrastructure further restrict access (Tandon et al., 2018). Latiné families, especially those in economically disadvantaged areas, rely heavily on public amenities and are less able to afford private recreational options (Rigolon et al., 2022). Research indicates that improved access leads to increased participation, underscoring the importance of equitable urban design (Fernandez et al., 2015).

Safety concerns also play a major role. Over half, 53%, of Latiné parents surveyed cited “strangers in the area” as a top concern, far more than other groups. Worries about traffic, supervision, and crime were also prevalent. These fears are echoed in earlier studies, which found that Spanish-speaking parents—especially those in inner-city neighborhoods—were less likely to allow their children to play outside due to safety anxieties (Kalish et al., 2010). Within these constrained conditions, Latiné preschoolers tend to engage in more sedentary behavior, and less physical activity than their peers (Lee et al., 2022).

The PLA data revealed differences in daily activities that appear to reflect variations in access, time, and learning contexts. While differences in watching television were minimal, patterns diverged across other activities. For example, Latiné children were less likely to engage in reading (61% vs. 73%) and creating artwork (36% vs. 40%), while showing higher engagement with digital media such as videos and video games (52% vs. 40%). Although outdoor play differences are small, the data suggest that Latiné families may value outdoor play when accessible spaces are available. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions that address these disparities and promote equitable access to outdoor experiences for Latiné children and families, framing green spaces as essential infrastructure rather than optional amenities.

Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need for system-level and community-informed interventions. Latiné families do value outdoor play—but only when spaces are safe, accessible, and culturally relevant. Green spaces must be treated as essential infrastructure, not optional amenities, if we are to close these gaps and ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive through nature-based learning.

## Cultural Values & Outdoor Engagement in Latiné Communities

To understand the Latiné community's relationship with the outdoors, it is essential to delve into cultural values and beliefs (*creencias*). Recent studies highlight a perspective on nature that is deeply communal, familial, and sometimes spiritual, contrasting with the individualistic focus often found in mainstream American outdoor recreation (Castillo, 2022). A foundational cultural value is *familismo*, the centrality of family in social life. Leisure activities, including outdoor experiences, are primarily undertaken within family and friendship groups, serving as an opportunity to strengthen social ties (Del Campo et al., 2017). For many, the motivation for outdoor recreation is the opportunity to connect with family, friends, and even ancestors (Justiniano, 2023). Nature is often viewed as an extension of the home—a place for gathering, picnicking, and strengthening communal bonds (Castillo, 2022). This communal orientation means that environmental programs are most successful when they foster a sense of community and connect to local, culturally relevant issues. Furthermore, many Latiné individuals, particularly those with Indigenous ancestry, hold a spiritual connection to *la naturaleza* (nature), viewing it as a source of healing and a way to reconnect with ancestral knowledge (Castillo, 2022). This is complemented by a widely shared belief in respecting and stewarding nature, a value often passed down from older family members (Justiniano, 2023).



## Barriers to Participation: A Multifaceted View

The challenges that Latiné families face in accessing outdoor spaces are complex and interconnected, stemming from a combination of practical constraints, safety concerns, and systemic issues. A primary barrier cited by many Latiné survey respondents is a lack of leisure time, a more significant factor than interest or financial constraints (Adams et al., 2006). This is compounded by physical access issues. Research has shown that communities of color and low-income communities have systematically less access to high-quality green spaces (Tandon et al., 2018; Rigolon, 2016). Latiné children are significantly less likely than their peers to live within walking distance of forests or open fields, reflecting inequitable patterns of neighborhood investment. These green spaces are not optional amenities but essential infrastructure for communities that rely on public facilities.

Safety concerns also heavily influence outdoor activity. Latiné parents report significantly higher levels of concern about “strangers in the area,” traffic, and neighborhood crime, which directly impacts their willingness to allow children to play outside and contributes to more sedentary behavior (Kalish et al., 2010; Tandon et al., 2018). Additionally, social barriers can play a role, as some Latiné individuals perceive certain outdoor recreation activities as being associated with “white or Caucasian culture,” which can create a feeling of not belonging (Justiniano, 2023). Finally, a lack of information provided in Spanish remains a barrier, particularly for older Latiné individuals. To be truly inclusive, outreach, materials, and on-site staff need to be bilingual to create a welcoming and accessible environment (Adams et al., 2006; Castillo, 2022).



## Recommendations for Culturally Responsive Engagement

To effectively and equitably engage Latiné communities in outdoor learning and recreation, strategies must be built around their core cultural values. This means moving away from individualistic models and designing programs that accommodate larger family and community groups. Community gardens, for example, serve as powerful gathering places that encourage interaction, the cultivation of culturally significant foods, and the sharing of traditions across generations (Del Campo et al., 2017). It is also vital to acknowledge and incorporate the deep spiritual and ancestral connections to nature that exist within the community. Using bilingual communications and storytelling can create a welcoming sense of *comunidad* (community) and validate diverse forms of outdoor engagement, such as picnicking and gardening (Castillo, 2022).

In urban planning, policy should prioritize the creation of safe, accessible green spaces within a 10-minute walk of residential areas, a strategy supported by organizations like the Trust for Public Land (TPL, 2021). Community-based interventions must also focus on alleviating safety concerns through improved infrastructure and supervision. Furthermore, all outreach and materials should be bilingual to foster an inclusive atmosphere where community members feel they belong (Adams et al., 2006; Castillo, 2022). Lastly, there is an urgent need for more multidisciplinary research focusing specifically on Latiné children and families. This research should explore the nuanced effectiveness of different ONBL interventions and inform the development of strategies that are both culturally relevant and genuinely beneficial.

## Conclusion: Empowering Families Through Cultural Understanding

Ensuring Latiné families benefit from the outdoors is not simply about building more parks or offering more programs. It requires a fundamental shift toward understanding and respecting the unique cultural values, social dynamics, and lived realities of the community. By embracing *familismo*, acknowledging spiritual connections to nature, and directly addressing barriers such as safety and time constraints, we can create opportunities that are not only accessible but also meaningful and appealing. By adopting culturally responsive approaches, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can strengthen the systems and environments that enable all children to thrive through meaningful engagement with the natural world.



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