Forget the great outdoors – children prefer city life

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Science Editor

If you’re thinking about moving the family to the country to give your children a taste of nature, you might be surprised to learn that some children prefer city life. A study has shown that adults have a strong preference for being in nature, while children prefer the city. However, the study also found that just because your children moan about being surrounded by fields rather than friends, that does not mean that a move to the countryside won’t benefit them in the long run.

Or as Marc Berman, from the University of Chicago, puts it, “Nature may be like broccoli. Kids may not like it, but it is still good for them.” It is well established that adults have a strong preference for being in nature and research has shown significant psychological and health benefits to proximity to green space. However, there has been little research into whether this desire to commune with nature is the same with children.

Professor Berman’s study, published in the journal Environmental Psychology, asked 251 children and their parents to rate the attractiveness of pictures of natural or urban environments. Unexpectedly, the children, who were all aged under 12, consistently preferred urban areas to the countryside. “This was surprising to us,” he said.

The study was laboratory-based and relatively small, but it will be replicated and investigated in other ways before drawing firm conclusions.

It seemed, at least superficially, to undermine ideas that a love of nature is hardwired, the result of millions of years of evolving in the natural world. “If humans have such an innate preference for nature, we should see kids preferring it as well. We did not find that result,” he said. It may be that part of our adult preference for greenery is instead, learnt.

The research also suggested that the health benefits known to be associated with nature did not come simply because we find it enjoyable — the effects of nature were decoupled from our preferences for it.

Professional work by his group had found other evidence for this, showing that a walk improves health to the same degree whether it occurs on a pleasant spring day or a chilly winter one.

“Nature is good for children, and adults. There’s tonnes of research showing interacting with nature is good for cognitive processing and mental health,” the professor said.

Exposure to green space has been linked to children having lower levels of ADHD, improved concentration and less stress. In this study, a survey of the parents found a link between higher concentration in their children and countryside living, whether or not the children preferred it. Professor Berman said this implied that with nature “you don’t have to like it to get the benefit.”

There is some evidence, perhaps linked to remote working, that more Britons are considering a move to the countryside. According to data from the Office for National Statistics, in 2018 the population of the most rural parts of the country increased by almost 1 per cent while most urban areas depopulated by more than 0.5 per cent.

The largest effects were seen in the biggest cities.

Kimberly Meidenbauer, a co-author on the research, said that parents thinking of templating the good life should not be surprised if their children object. Neither, though, should they be swayed.

“Kids don’t have a great intuition of what is good for them, and we should encourage them to be in nature even if they don’t want to,” she said. What if you get to the countryside and find they spend the whole time moping indoors?

“I’m not a parent so I’m not going to advocate kicking them out of the house and shutting the door, but…”

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Stunt man gets egg on his face

Feathers could fly in Downing Street after the revelation that Lee Cain, Boris Johnson’s chief spinster, used to chase David Cameron while dressed up as a chicken for the Daily Mirror. Cain will work on the no-deal Brexit strategy with Alex Aiken, executive director of government communications, who has form when it comes to men in chicken suits. During the 1997 election, Aiken got into a cockfight with the Mirror’s chicken, then manned by the son of DJ David Hamilton, who tried to disrupt a Tory event. Angered by such fowl play, Aiken wrestled the bird to the ground as photographers chanted “peck him”. Let Cain be warned: you don’t cluck with a man like Aiken.

Hazard an opinion

Michael Cockerrell, a fine bird from the other side of the Westminster farmyard, tells Civil Service World that its readers used to be wary around him. The political film-maker once shared a train carriage with two senior Whitehall officials and, assuming them it was off the record, chatted for two hours. “It was the most anodyne and banal conversation I’ve ever had,” he recalled. On reaching London he thanked them, to which one mandarin said: “I found the whole business distinctly hazardous.”

Others opened up to him after retirement. When Cockerrell was invited to interview Robin Butler in his flat near Westminster Cathedral he began by asking the former cabinet secretary why he lived so close to work. “When we bought it there were a lot of IRA bombs,” Butler replied. “I thought the one place the IRA wouldn’t bomb is the cathedral.”

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Equitable Life

Time to decide on the future of the Equitable

We have been writing to policyholders about an important Proposal. If the Proposal is approved, all policyholders who are still with the Equitable would be affected. Policyholders that have already moved their policy elsewhere, or cashed in their benefits, will not be affected by the Proposal.

If approved the Proposal would:

- Increase With-Profits Policy Values with an immediate one-off Uplift;
- Remove Investment Guarantees (including any guaranteed annual increases) and any With-Profits Switching Rights;
- Convert With-Profits Policies to Unit-Linked Policies; and
- Transfer the Equitable’s business to Utmost Life and Pensions

With-profits policyholders will be asked to vote as part of this process and the whole Proposal requires approval by the High Court.

We are currently writing out to all affected policyholders to provide full details, including the risks and benefits, so they are able to make a decision about whether the Proposal is right for them.

Our website www.equitable.co.uk has also been updated with information about the Proposal and all the key documents.

If you think you have a policy with us and haven’t heard from us, please let us know as we want to make sure that we reach as many policyholders as we can, to enable them to have their say.

If you have any questions you can reach us in the following ways:

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