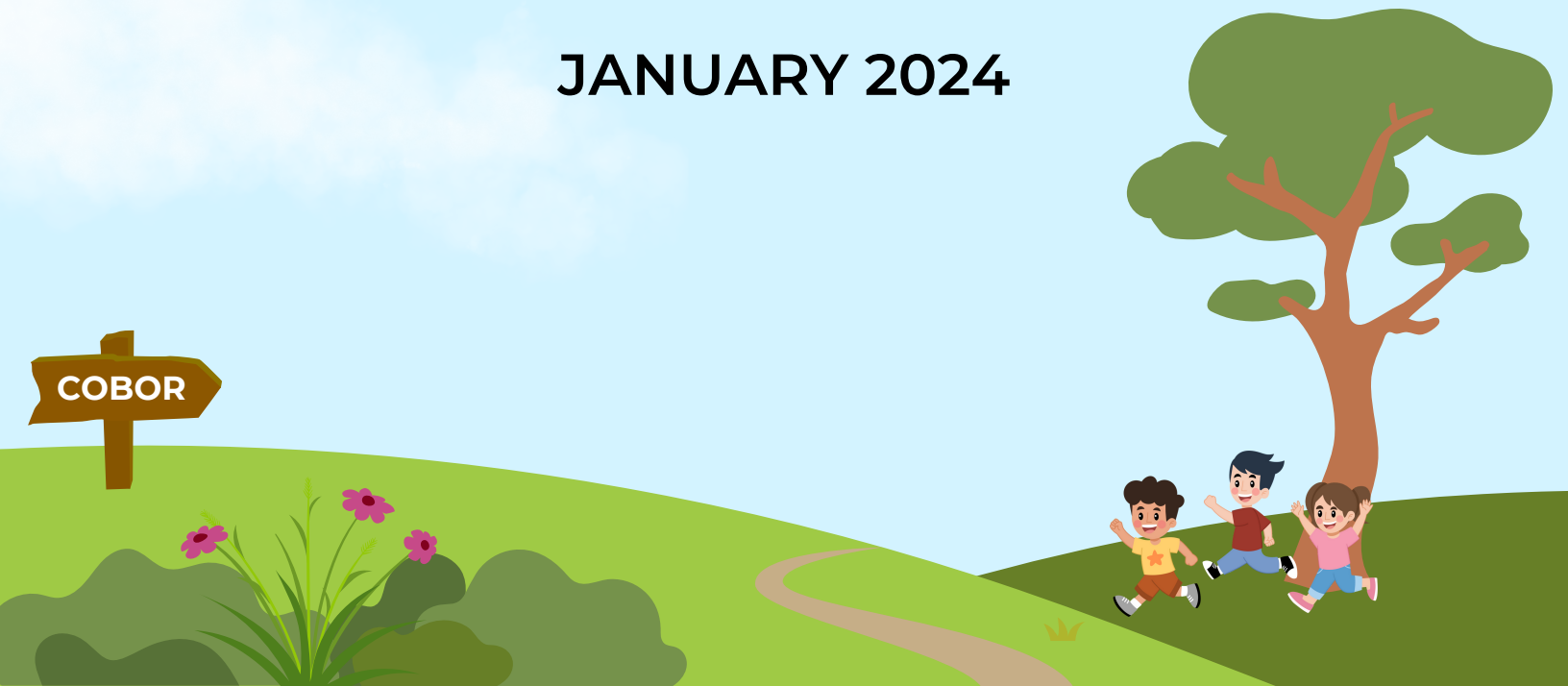
Empowering from Cradle to Career

HOUSTON CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR BILL OF RIGHTS

CITY OF HOUSTON GUIDEBOOK

JANUARY 2024



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

In the ever-evolving landscape of our cities, it is crucial to acknowledge the growing disconnect between children and the natural world, a phenomenon with profound implications for their well-being and the future of our urban environments. As we witness a nationwide trend of children losing their connection to nature, Mayor John Whitmire and the City of Houston remain resolute in their commitment to counter this trajectory. Our initiative to encourage children to engage with the outdoors is not merely a response to a concerning trend; it is a proactive measure to safeguard the quality of life, health, and the future sustainability of our city's natural resources.

The City of Houston understands the transformative power of nature in fostering resilience, creativity, and a sense of environmental responsibility. Our commitment is grounded in the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to establish a meaningful connection with the natural world, starting at an early age and perpetuating throughout their lives.

Together, let us build a foundation where the intrinsic link between children and nature is not just preserved but thrives, ensuring a healthier, happier, and more sustainable future for all.

DIRECTOR OLIVERA JANKOVSKA

COBOR

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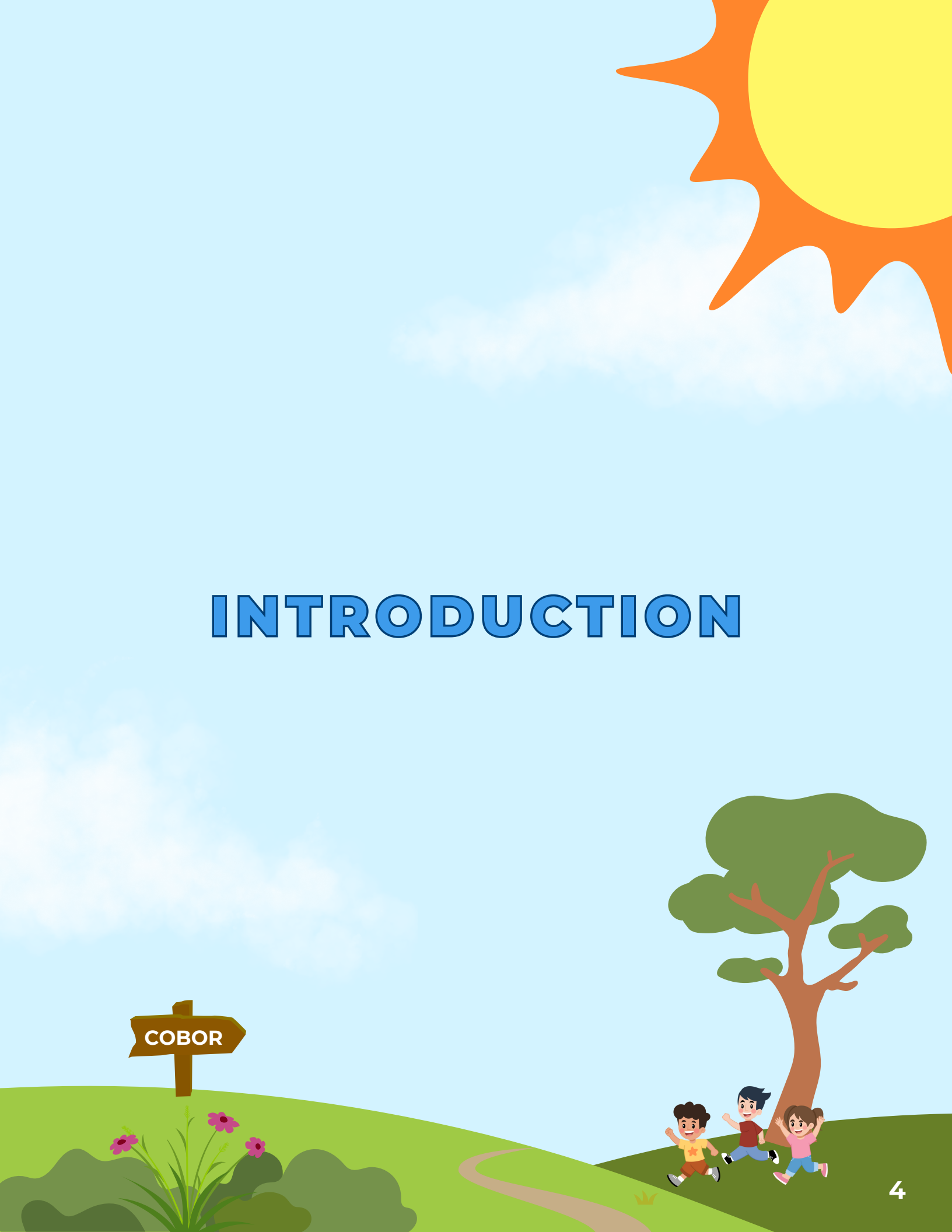
INTRODUCTION



ABOUT MOEYE

Mayor John Whitmire stands as a steadfast proponent of fostering a profound connection between children and the natural world, recognizing the invaluable benefits it brings to their holistic development. With an unwavering commitment to creating a city where children can thrive amidst the beauty of nature, Mayor Whitmire champions initiatives aimed at encouraging young people to explore, appreciate, and engage with the environment.

Understanding the pivotal role that nature plays in nurturing creativity, resilience, and a sense of well-being, the Mayor is dedicated to providing opportunities for children in Houston to connect with the outdoors. Through the **Mayor's Office of Education and Youth Engagement (MOEYE)**, Mayor John Whitmire envisions a city where every child has the chance to forge a lasting bond with nature, fostering a generation that cherishes and preserves the natural world.

The MOEYE will continue to be a **bridge between youth and resources** within the city and connect youth to the many youth supporting programs in the City of Houston. Additionally, the MOEYE is determined to expand its outreach and **support to marginalized children and youth** by connecting them to essential knowledge and resources that help them thrive professionally and personally.

CONTEXT

The City of Houston remains steadfast in its commitment to providing opportunities for all children to forge a lifelong connection with nature, firmly believing that increasing **children's access to and engagement with the natural world is pivotal to the vision of an inclusive and vibrant city.** Research consistently highlights the transformative power of regular outdoor play and learning, emphasizing its positive impact on children's physical and mental health, social-emotional skills, and academic achievements. Additionally, access to nature also instills a sense of environmental stewardship.

Yet, when disparities in nature access persist, shaped by income disparities and zip codes, marginalized communities are unjustly deprived of these invaluable benefits.

In 2018, Houston embarked on an impactful journey as one of the 18 U.S. cities selected by the **National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network** to join the transformative Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative. This collaborative effort has been instrumental in guiding the city in enhancing equitable access to nature, ultimately elevating the overall well-being of its children. The MOEYE also introduced the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights in 2023, a set of fundamental rights that every young Houstonian deserves, including the right to clean air, green spaces, and the joyous exploration of the natural world.

HOUSTON CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR BILL OF RIGHTS

WHAT IS THE COBOR?

The **Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR)** illustrates what equitable access to nature should look like and establishes a common foundation and high aspirations for nature connection in a community. It is a messaging tool that raises awareness of the importance of children's connection to nature, and a public facing symbol of the overarching goals a city or state has for its children's outdoor experiences.

The Houston COBOR was developed by an **intergenerational committee** of local youth and community leaders and was formally recognized through a **Mayoral Proclamation** during Houston's Climate Week in April 2023– including **twelve rights** every child should have access to. The COBOR hopes to continue engaging families, children, youth, city leaders and agencies, and community partners through the promotion of the twelve rights listed.

COBOR Adoption Celebration During Houston Climate Week on April 2023

COBOR RIGHTS

COBOR RIGHTS

Houston children have the right to:

1. Safe and accessible routes to outdoor spaces in their communities
2. Adequate shade in the outdoors
3. Connect with nature on their school grounds
4. Equitably funded public parks regardless of zip code
5. Discover leadership opportunities to be stewards of nature
6. Be included and accommodated with accessible outdoor environments
7. Green spaces that mitigate the impact of climate change
8. Experience the mental health and holistic wellness benefits of engaging with nature
9. See and experience native wildlife and plants in their local park and green spaces
10. Free or low-cost outdoor programming
11. Breathe fresh and clean air
12. Learn how to be safe in the outdoors

HOUSTON CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR BILL OF RIGHTS

SAFE ROUTES BENEFITS

RIGHT : SAFE ROUTES

Children have the right to safe and accessible routes to outdoor spaces in their communities.

Safe routes enable children to engage in physical activity, foster cognitive and emotional growth, build social connections, develop environmental awareness, and ensure their safety while accessing these valuable recreational spaces.

- Safe routes to parks and outdoor areas are important for children's physical, cognitive, and social development.
- Equitable access to the outdoors is essential to address income and racial disparities.
- Better access to more destinations, providing options on how to visit parks without relying on a car.
- Safe routes allows children to develop independence and build confidence in exploring and navigating their community.

Hear the **impact** of safe routes from Houston youth.

Learn more about the **City of Houston's Sidewalk Fund**

Vision Zero Map Tool informs the City of Houston of streets and intersections where you are concerned about walking safety.

16 Fun Sidewalk Chalk **Activity Ideas**

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ACCESS TO SHADE BENEFITS

RIGHT : ACCESS TO SHADE

Children have the right to adequate shade in the outdoors.

Shade is important for equity and child development because it promotes health, safety, inclusivity, and environmental awareness. It ensures that all children have equal access to safe and comfortable outdoor spaces.

- Shade is especially important to those who navigate Houston on foot or by public transit, which is why access to shade is part of the City of Houston's **Climate Action Plan**
- The **American Forests** initiative study shows that, on average, in neighborhoods where most residents live in poverty, there's 25% less tree canopy than those where less of the residents are in poverty.
- In cities across the U.S., healthy trees prevent roughly **1,200 heat-related deaths** and many more heat-related illnesses each year. Heat kills more people than any other type of extreme weather.

Hear the **impact** of access to shade from Houston youth.

Trees for Houston provides applications for tree requests and hosts tree give-aways.

Learn about the City of Houston's goal to plant **4.6 million** native trees by 2030

Houston's **Arboretum & Nature Center** hosts kid-friendly activities and provides plenty of shaded outdoor recreation.

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SCHOOL GROUNDS AS GREEN SPACES BENEFITS

RIGHT : SCHOOL GROUNDS AS GREEN SPACES

Children have the right to connect with nature on their school grounds.

Green schoolyards can provide a safe space for children and adults to engage in social, outdoor activities and thus benefit from the increased access to nature.

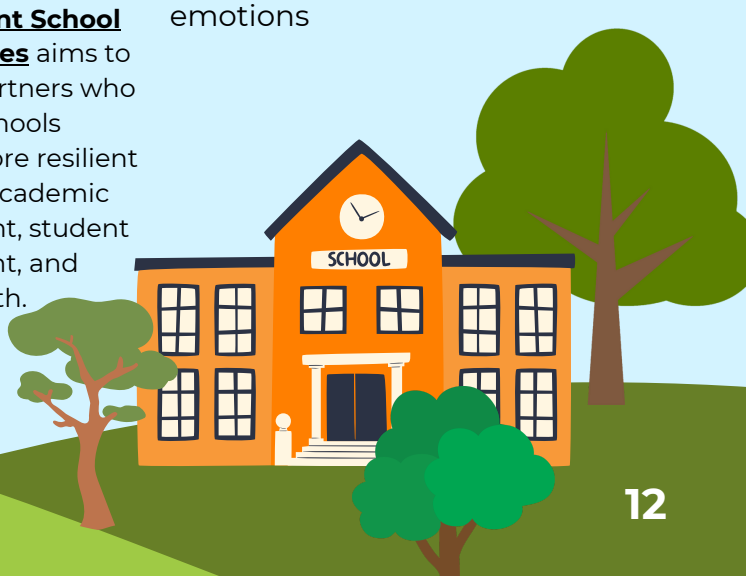
Hear the **impact** of school grounds as green spaces from Houston youth.

The **SPARK School Park Program** works with schools and neighborhoods to develop community parks on public school grounds.

Do you want a **garden** at your child's school? Houston's Native Bees provides guidance on planning and implementation.

CCCN-Houston and Resilient School Communities aims to convene partners who can help schools become more resilient and boost academic achievement, student engagement, and overall health.

- A **study** found that students at schools with more tree cover performed better academically—especially if they came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Choices made by schools on how they create and manage their landscapes directly impacts whether younger generations will grow up in a concrete world or a green one.
- Promotes imaginative and explorative play; and have therapeutic properties which help improve mental well-being and contribute to calmer children with decreased negative emotions



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EQUITABLE PARK INVESTMENTS BENEFITS

RIGHT: EQUITABLE PARK INVESTMENTS

Children have the right to equitably funded public parks regardless of zip code.

Regular access to neighborhood parks is critical to quality of life in urban areas in many tangible ways, including promoting civic pride and neighborhood cohesion; mitigating flood risks and improving air quality.

Hear the **impact** of Equitable Park Investments from Houston Youth

50/50 Park Partners, an initiative created by Mayor Sylvester Turner to improve neighborhood parks.

Houston is improving neighborhood parks through the **Complete Communities Initiative**.

Houston Parks Board hosts **volunteer opportunities** to maintain city parks.

- Parks have extraordinary reach and bring many benefits to our **communities**. Neighborhood parks serve as hubs for recreation and civic engagement.
- Nationwide, 100 million people, including 28 million children, **do not** have a viable park within a **10-minute walk** of home.
- Addresses **environmental and health challenges** such as stormwater flood management, air quality improvement, and diffusion of the urban heat island effect.

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RIGHT : YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Children have the right to discover leadership opportunities to be stewards of nature.

This is incredibly important for young people, regardless of circumstance. By trying new things and facing fears, children are proving to themselves that they can overcome obstacles and see themselves as powerful and successful.

Hear the about **impact** on youth from participation and engagement opportunities.

The **SCA Houston Community Programs** aim to build the next generation of conservation leaders and environmental stewards.

Houston's **Precinct 3 Parks Program** offers many youth activities within its 69 parks.

Houston Wilderness has created a **Wilderness Passport** to encourage youth and families to explore the Houston outdoors.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND YOUTH ENGAGMENT BENEFITS

- Spending time in nature positively contributes to children's well-being, providing a break from the stresses and anxieties of modern childhood.
- Unstructured outdoor recreation provides opportunities to take risks, develop problem solving skills and build self-esteem.
- Time spent outdoors during childhood, and role models who care for nature, are the two most influential factors that contribute to environmental stewardship in adults.

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RIGHT : ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL ABILITIES

Children have the right to be included and accommodated with accessible outdoor environments.

The ways available to us to experience public lands might be as diverse as our society. There are many ways to create accessible and inclusive opportunities for outdoor recreation, and it starts with considering the way people approach disability and the outdoors.

Hear the **impact** of accessibility to nature from Houston youth.

Visit **James Driver Inclusive Park**, Harris County's first fully inclusive park for all abilities

Houston's **Adaptive Sports and Recreation** offers quality of life programming for people with differing abilities.

Check out Houston's Parks and Recreation list of **Parks without Limits**

ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL ABILITIES BENEFITS

- Accessibility to public lands first became a **legal requirement** in 1968, but the retrofits on federal lands took nearly 30 years, and people with disabilities born in 2000 are part of the first generation who can dream of visiting National Parks.
- Scientific studies have shown that exposure to nature **decreases** anxiety & depression, and **increases** well-being & creative problem-solving.
- **Sensory play** is important because it helps children with disabilities learn to live fuller lives.

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CLIMATE RESILIENCE BENEFITS

RIGHT : CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Children have the right to connect with nature on their school grounds.

Climate change-related impacts in childhood can have lifelong effects on learning, physical and mental health. Children deserve climate resilience to protect their well-being, ensure a sustainable future, uphold their rights, and promote inter-generational equity.

Hear the **impact** of climate resilience from Houston youth.

Houston specific, **recycling** information

Learn more about the City of Houston's **Climate Action Plan and Resilient Houston** initiatives.

Track the City's progress towards climate goals with the **Resilience and Recovery Tracker**

- Children are uniquely **vulnerable** to climate change due to a variety of physical, cognitive, behavioral, and social factors.
- Climate resilience **empowers** children with knowledge, awareness, and understanding of environmental issues.
- Climate resilience ensures that **children's basic needs**, including access to clean air, water, food, & shelter, are met even in the face of climate change.
- Building climate resilience will enable children to tackle **climate challenges** and work towards a sustainable and thriving future.

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MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS BENEFITS

RIGHT: MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Children have the right to experience the mental health and holistic wellness benefits of engaging with nature.

Spending time outdoors isn't just enjoyable — it's also necessary. Kids should play outside because it builds confidence, promotes creativity, teaches responsibility, gets them moving, and reduces stress.

Hear the **impact** of mental health and wellness from Houston youth

Check out over 600 unique works of art within Houston's **Civic Art Collection.**

De-stress with a visit to a community ran garden established by Houston's **Urban Garden Program**

View a schedule of free outdoor **fitness classes** at Discovery Green.

- In natural environments, we practice an effortless type of attention known as **soft fascination** that creates feelings of pleasure, not fatigue.
- **Nature play** allows children to think more freely, design their own activities, and approach the world in inventive ways.
- The way that kids play in nature has a lot **less structure** than most types of indoor play, and letting your child choose how they treat nature means they have the power to control their own actions.

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NATIVE PLANTS AND WILDLIFE BENEFITS

RIGHT : NATIVE PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

Children have the right to see and experience native wildlife and plants in their local park and green spaces

The more biodiversity in an ecosystem, the more stability and resilience it has. Studying the relationships among native species and their importance in supporting the biodiversity of a habitat can encourage local environmental stewardship.

- **Biodiversity** is essential for children's health and well-being, economic prosperity, food safety and security, and other areas critical to all people.
- Homeowners, landscapers, and local policy makers can benefit birds and other wildlife by simply selecting **native plants** when making their landscaping decisions.
- Plants native to one region may become troublesome when they're introduced to other regions. Utilizing native plants ensures a resilient and thriving **ecosystem**.

Hear the about **impact** of native plants and wildlife from Houston youth.

Create your own **pocket prairie** where children can help re-create food and habitats for native plants and wildlife.

Check the **Native Plants Database** to see what plants are native to your area.

The **Houston Audubon** provides programing and activities for all ages and focuses on native species conservation.

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AFFORDABILITY BENEFITS

RIGHT : AFFORDABILITY

Children have the right to free or low-cost outdoor programming.

Affordability of outdoor programs is particularly important and valuable to break down the barriers for families who don't have extra resources for leisure or transportation to green spaces.

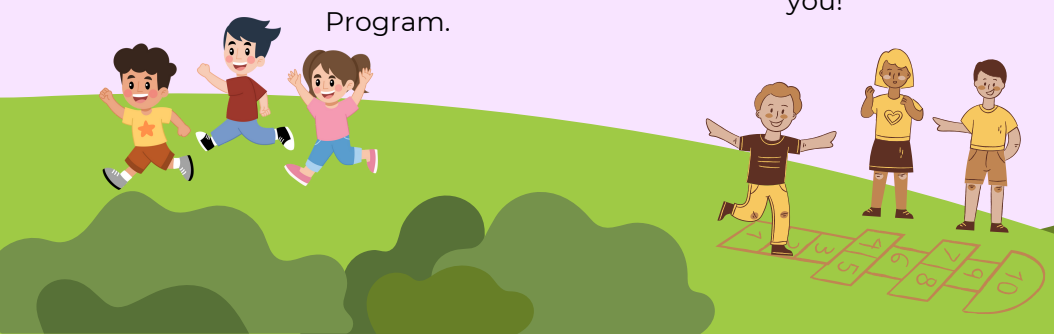
Check out the City of Houston's affordable **After-School** Enrichment Program.

The City of Houston initiative, **Out 2 Learn**, focuses on increasing access to affordable out-door activities.

Check out the City of Houston's affordable **Summer** Enrichment Program.

The Out 2 Learn initiative's **database** shows affordable out-door programming near you!

- Study by the Conservation Science Partners shows **70%** of people living in low-income areas will experience nature deprivation due to human activity
- Land use decisions should prioritize access to natural areas, productive landscapes, and other green spaces for people of all ages, **income levels**, and abilities.
- Research by Outward Bound suggest that children should be outdoors for at least t**hree hours** a day.



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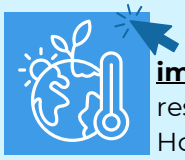
RIGHT : HEALTHY AIR QUALITY

Children have the right to breathe fresh and clean air.

Ensuring healthy air quality is crucial for children and families engaging in outdoor programs, as it promotes their overall well-being and contributes to an inclusive environment by removing obstacles related to respiratory health– enhancing the accessibility of such initiatives for all.



Hear the **impact** of climate resilience from Houston youth.

Check out the City of Houston's **partnership** with Reliant Energy

View the **Houston Air Quality Index** to stay updated.

Learn more about how Houston is combating air pollution with the **Bureau of Pollution Control and Prevention**.

HEALTHY AIR QUALITY BENEFITS

- Research shows that **more than 90%** of the world's population live in areas where air pollution is exceeds the World Health Organizations guidelines.
- According to the World Health Organization, reducing air pollution levels can **reduce** the burden of disease from stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and both chronic and acute respiratory diseases.
- According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, healthy air quality not only benefits human's health, but also **benefits the environment**, and its ecosystems.

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SAFETY AWARENESS BENEFITS

RIGHT: SAFETY AWARENESS

Children have the right to learn how to be safe in the outdoors.

Prioritizing safety awareness in outdoor programs is essential for children and families, as it fosters an environment where all participants can enjoy recreational activities with confidence that their well-being is secured.

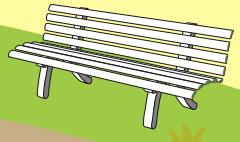
- With a crime rate of 55 per one thousand residents, Houston has one of the **highest crime rates in America** compared to all communities of all sizes, according to Neighborhood Scout.
- According to Center for American Progress, child care safety protections **ensure** that children are cared for in safe, high-quality care environments.
- Less crime is connected to **happiness** amongst households and communities.

Check out the City of Houston's After-school Achievement Program to **reduce crime.**

View the City of Houston's **Child Safety Guide** to increase your child's safety at all time.

Participate in the **Houston Inspira** Public Health Campaign to improve safety in Houston through storytelling.

View the **"Keep Houston SAFE"** Guide by the Houston Police Department to increase safety awareness.



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MOEYE STAFF & LEADERSHIP

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- Assistant Director Jessica McGowan
- Program Manager laura Cuellar

CONTRIBUTORS

- City of Houston Youth Ambassadors
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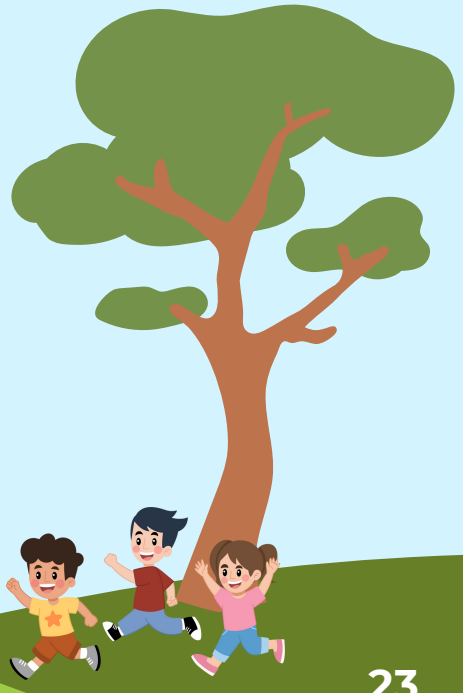
- City Department of Neighborhoods
- Fort Bend County HHS
- The Nature Conservancy in Texas
- City Parks and Recreation Department
- Children's Environmental Literacy Foundation
- Kinder Foundation at Rice University
- The Student Conservation Association
- PBK
- Healthy Tweaks, LLC
- Texas Children in Nature Network
- Nature Heritage Society
- SPARK School Park Program
- Houston Audubon



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