

“Experience the Environment” Youth Workshops

Jaylynn Armstrong¹, Liisa Wagner¹, Paige Booth²

¹Killingly High School; ²UConn Natural Resources Conservation Academy

Project Motivation & Goals

Time spent outdoors or in nature has been found to promote young people's physical, mental/emotional, and social well-being. Children with strong nature connections are also more likely to demonstrate pro-environmental or sustainable behaviors.

However, despite the benefits, the typical current American lifestyle involves a strong reliance on technology and much more time spent in front of a screen, disconnected from the environment (Fig. 1). Youth are increasingly unaware of nature around them.

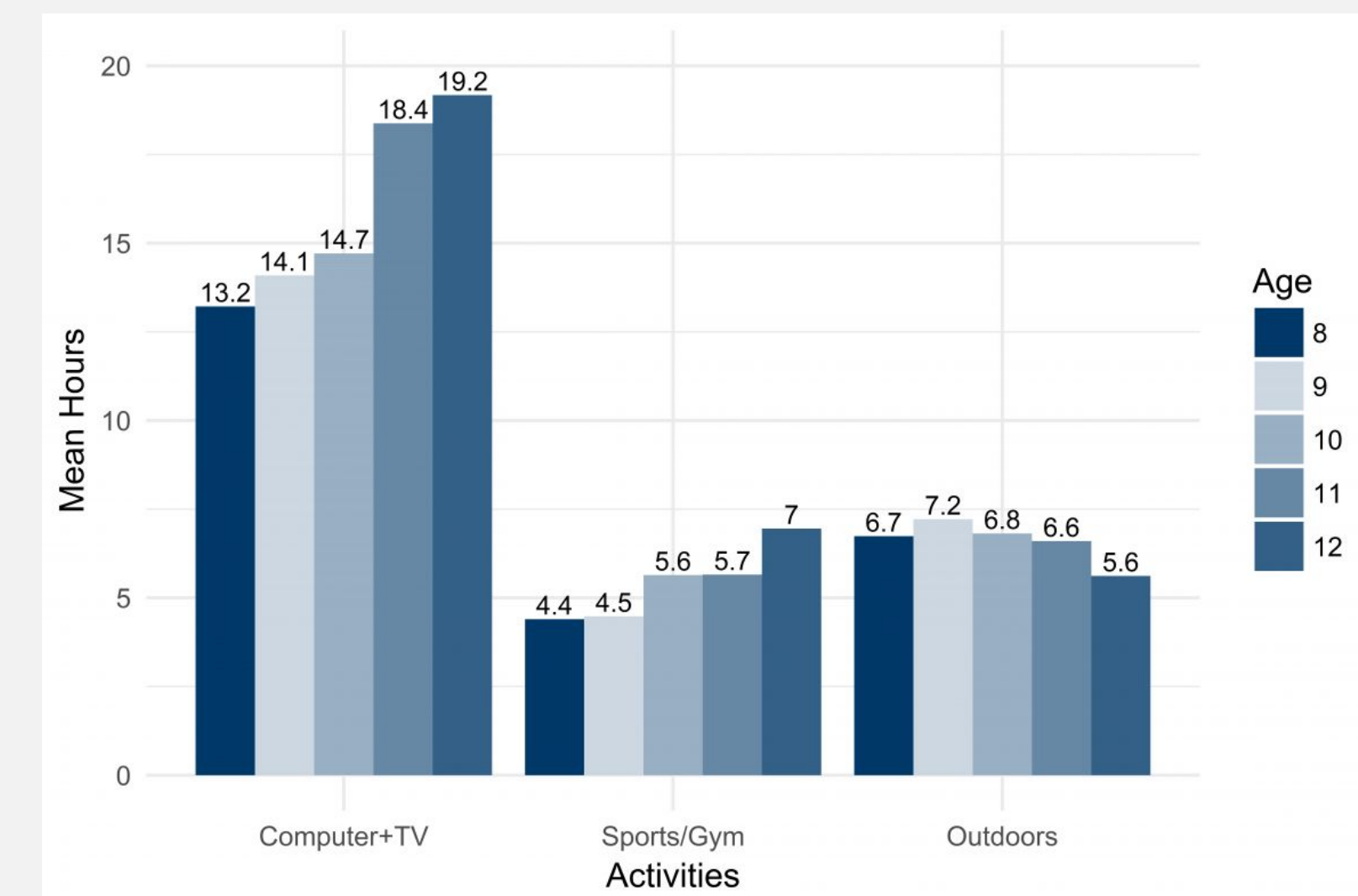


Figure 1. (left) Average (mean) number of hours children spent in each activity per week. Source: Nature of Americans <https://natureofamericans.org/>

Figure 2. (right) (a) Presentation cover slide used at the Biodiversity & Food Webs event. (b) Food web building activity. (c) Plant & Take Home event presentation cover slide. (d) Survey responses from the Biodiversity & Food Webs event. (e) Jalyynn presenting during the Plant & Take Home event. (f) Jalyynn and one of the youth attendees with their peat pot plant

The future of the environment depends on the next generation. We need to educate and instill a passion for environmental conservation in young people to ensure we have a healthy Earth for years to come.

My goal is to inspire local youth to become future stewards of the environment. Through this project, I worked to:

- ★ Develop and implement environmental education workshops for youth in my community with various nature-based topics and hands-on activities
- ★ Survey youth participants to analyze what they learned and the effect of my workshops on their confidence, mindset, and connection with nature

Project Steps

Curriculum Development

- The first step was coming up with overall topics for the workshop events. As an Ag student, I love plants and animals, which is why I chose the topics of food webs and plants.
- Next, I researched and brainstormed activity ideas alongside my community partner. I also created slideshows for each of the activities and organized lesson materials.

Workshop Coordination

- I identified and reserved locations for each workshop, made fliers to advertise the events, posted them on social media, hung them up, and sent them via email.
- I offered a survey to the participants and their guardians with questions such as: “How likely are you to join another environmental science related program?” and “Do you feel more confident in your environmental knowledge?” (Fig 2d)

Youth Workshop Events & Project Outcomes

Biodiversity & Food Webs

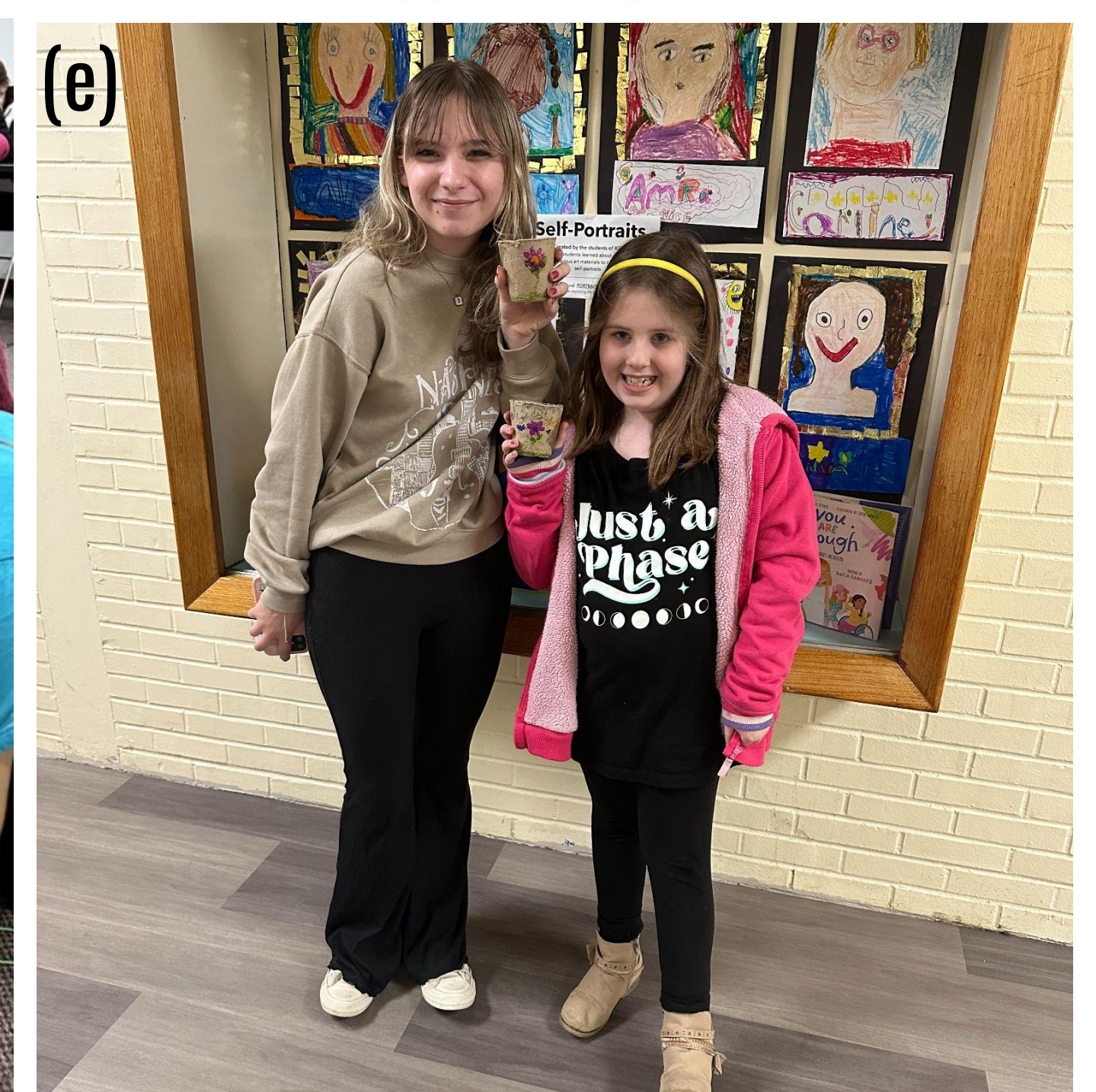
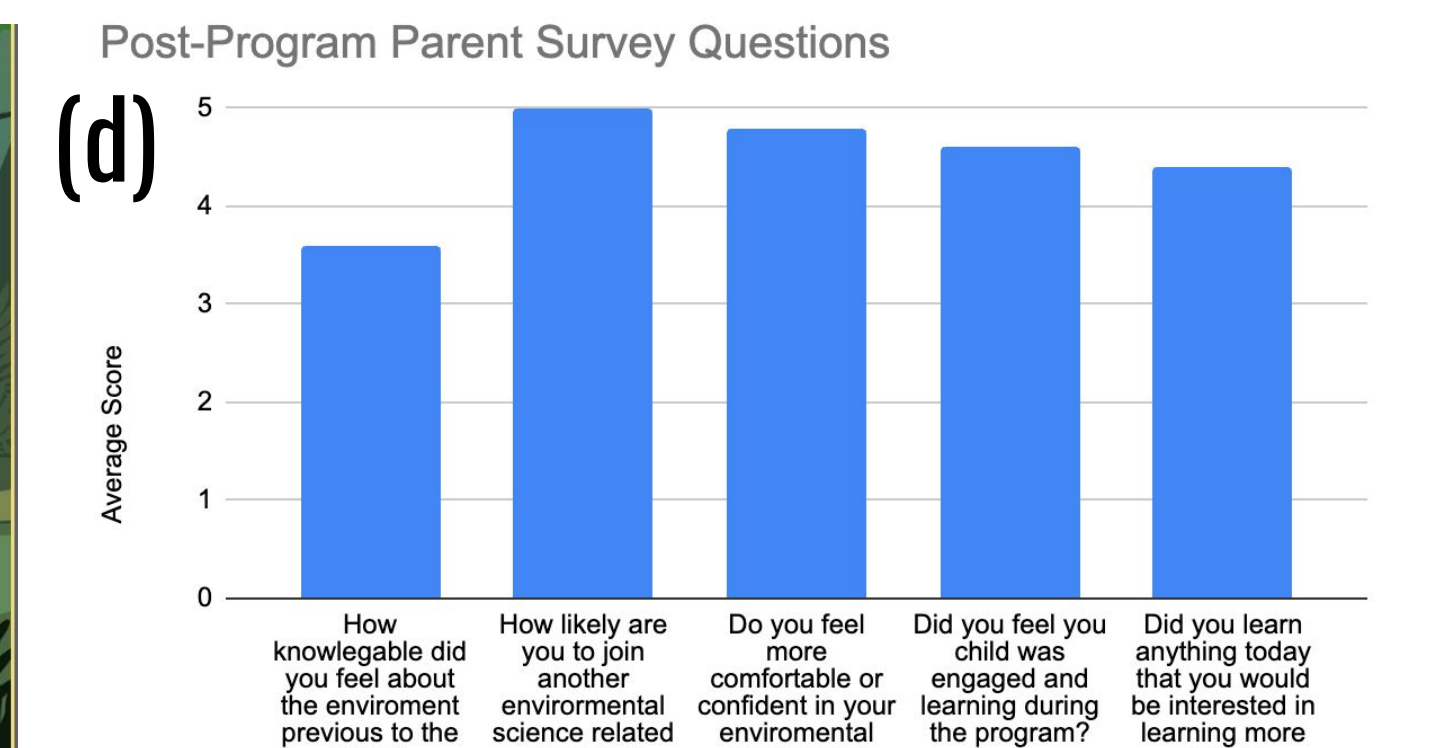
- **Curriculum:** Focused on the different food web levels, including producers, primary consumers, and secondary consumers (Fig. 2a.).
- **Activity:** Each youth participant was given an organism card. We passed around a ball of yarn to create a physical web to demonstrate the food web concept (Fig. 2b).
- **Audience:** 5 children ranging from 4 to 8 years old attended this event at the Killingly Public Library on 12/27/23.
- **Impact:** After the event, one of the kids went up to their mom and said, “*We’re all connected!*” All of the students said they understood the topics better (Fig. 2d).

Plant & Take Home Day

- **Curriculum:** During this activity, I taught the kids about how plants work (Fig. 2c). I went through the different parts of the plant and had them guess what they were called. We sang a song that helped them remember the different parts of the plant as well (Fig. 2f).
- **Activity:** Next, we went through the steps of planting a seed. Then, each of the kids had a chance to decorate a peat cup and plant their own bean seed (Fig. 2e).
- **Audience:** We had 13 attendees at this event, ranging from 3 to 4 years old. This event took place at Goodyear Early Childhood Center on 3/25/24.
- **Impact:** It was amazing to see the younger kids engaged in the topic. Also, one child called me *Ms. Jaylynn*, which I thought was very cute!

Project Outcomes

One major outcome of my project was engaging parents in discussions about the environment, the world around their kids, and ways to enjoy it together, sustainably. I gave family members a chance to connect in a new way. Many caregivers left the workshops with a smile on their faces as the kids shared their experiences. There are now more people in my town who are supportive of and passionate about environmental conservation.



Community Partnership



Figure 3. Teaching about food webs at the first youth workshop.

My community partner, Liisa Wagner, took time to meet and plan the project, collaborated with me on creating lesson plans, and helped me learn classroom management strategies.

Liisa gave me a number of connections and resources to teachers in other schools. She also recommended places to advertise my workshops that would reach the right audiences.

Through this project and partnership, I learned a lot about communication and perseverance. I’m very proud of how it turned out.

Conclusion & Acknowledgements

Environmental science is a huge passion of mine and an important part of my life. Through this project, I introduced people from my community to explore that same passion or provided them a gateway to find one of their own.

It is my hope that through this experience I was able to: 1) spark a pathway for youth and their families to connect in fun and environmentally-conscious ways going forward, and 2) instill in them a reason to fight for the environment now and in the future.

I am excited to partner with the Killingly Public Library again this summer for another youth environmental science program. I have also made many connections throughout the school to help with future projects.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank my teachers, Liisa Wagner at Killingly High School for supplying me with the materials needed for the project, the librarians at the Killingly Library who provided a place to host the first workshop event, and my family for helping advertise and attend. Thank you also to Emily Caviggia, Heather Sansone, Paige Booth, and Laura Cisneros. Finally, thank you to various funding sources that allow UConn NRCA to provide me with a stipend.