

# COMBATING OBESITY WITH TREE COOKIES AND MUD PIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF A COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PROCESS ON THREE NATURAL PLAY SPACES IN NORTHWEST MINNESOTA

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### **1 ABSTRACT**

*With rising obesity rates community health is suffering, human connections to nature are dwindling, and social capital is in decline. A growing body of research highlights positive connections between human health and relationships with natural places. Early public parks capitalized on provided benefits to community health and some argue that urban planning and public health policy have since diverged. Given that parks provide opportunities to improve physical, mental, spiritual, social, and environmental health, reevaluation of the relationships between community health and parks should be a revitalized component of community dialog (Maller et al., 2002). Natural play spaces are reemerging as a method for engaging children to improve health through physical activity and provide opportunities for less structured free play with natural materials in outdoor environments. In 2010 public health officials, researchers and concerned citizens set out to design and implement natural play spaces in communities throughout Northwest Minnesota with dual goals of promoting an increased sense of community ownership and promoting healthy, active lifestyles to curb disparate obesity rates. This case study examines the collaborative process between academic, local government, and community stakeholders in the planning, design and implementation of three natural play spaces in rural Northwest Minnesota and evaluates the ability of these types of spaces to foster social capital and provide a setting to improve community health through reconnecting people with nature.*

#### **1.1 Keywords**

nature play, children, health, engagement