Somewhere in your head you probably have the idea that parks are important. You've realized that it's crucial for people to be able to interact with nature in spaces like parks. Many of your fondest childhood memories happened in parks. To some extent, you're aware that the parks in the neighbourhood where you grew up had an impact on who you are today.

It turns out parks are a crucial part of any community. They have a significant impact on the development of children and the happiness of everyone in the neighbourhood.

Keep reading if you want to understand why parks are important to your neighbourhood--and why Toronto needs to actively improve its park network.

1. Storm Water Collection

Unpaved ground absorbs water. Trees are a far more efficient—and less expensive—method of managing storm water than sewers and drainage ditches made of concrete. With extreme weather patterns on the rise, an increase in trees could save the city millions.

Don't believe it? In Garland, Texas they took an active approach to encouraging private property owners to plant trees on their land. Their tree coverage reduces storm water runoff by 19 million cubic feet during a storm. These measures have also significantly increased air quality, making their urban forest worth $5.3 million annually (http://www.esri.com/news/arcnews/spring01articles/gisgivesforesters.html).

2. Reduction of the Urban Heat Island Effect

The abundance of flat, dark surfaces made up of asphalt and concrete in cities creates what is known as the Urban Heat Island Effect. This makes urban neighbourhoods noticeably warmer than other nearby areas and is a major factor in smog creation.

Luckily even a small increase of trees in the neighbourhood can reduce this effect. It can be virtually eliminated from cities through a combination of increased park space and green roofs. Strategic planting of trees and vegetation—that means letting the branches hang over the sidewalk—can reduce summer temperatures by 1-5℃ (http://www.epa.gov/heatisland/mitigation/trees.htm).

3. Centre of Community

Parks provide space for neighbourhood residents to interact with each other and make new friends. They're also great spaces for events and for people to engage in recreational activities. This allows people to develop a sense of community. A park is perfect for a picnic, a concert or a farmer's market—whatever your community feels it needs.

Increasing the number of parks and recreational facilities in a neighbourhood also reduces crime rates, especially among youth. By giving young people a safe place to interact with one another they keep them off the streets and out of trouble. Many American communities have created "Midnight Basketball" programs, keeping courts open late and drastically reducing their youth crime rates (http://www.eastshorepark.org/benefits_of_parks%20tpl.pdf).

4. Cleans the Air

Trees remove a wide variety of pollutants from the air. Air pollution can increase risk of certain cancers and have adverse effects on children, the elderly and anyone with underlying respiratory problems. It also reduces the distance you can see on a summer day and increases the mortality rate in highly polluted cities.

Even a small increase in the number of city parks or their size can make a big difference when it comes to air pollution. In Atlanta, a U.S. city renowned for its lack of green space—though they are actively working to change that reputation—trees remove 19 million pounds of pollutants each year, a service that would cost $47 million if done by a company (http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/physicalactivity.htm).

5. Mental Health Boost

It seems obvious that a place where people are able to make connections, meet new friends and participate in recreational activities is also good for the locals' mental health. After all, physical health and strong relationships are important to maintaining mental well being.

Yet the mental health benefits of parks go beyond the obvious. Direct exposure to nature has its own benefits on mental health, reducing stress and increasing happiness. And these effects take effect almost immediately. A study by Finnish researchers found that even ten minutes in a park or urban woodland area could tangibly reduce stress. Participants felt most restored after time spent in the urban woodland (http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272494413000959).

6. A Place for   Physical Activity

You've probably heard about the many problems caused by a lack of physical activity. The sedentary lifestyle many Canadians live today is directly linked to obesity, which can cause a number of health problems including certain forms of cancer and heart disease.

Parks make a neighbourhood more enjoyable to walk through and provide space for popular sports, encouraging physical activities. They provide hiking trails and other amenities designed to get people active. Considering how few Canadians get enough exercise, this is incredibly important, especially for low income families and others who simply can't afford the gym (http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/getactive/barriers.html).

7. Places for Kids to Be Outside

Being outside and playing in nature is crucial for the healthy development of children. Learning to play in nature improves hand eye co-ordination. Regular time in nature also improves the child's ability to learn and reduces symptoms of ADHD, training the brain to focus better. Children who spend a significant amount of time in nature also experience better emotional stability and improved mental health.

Parks also provide great opportunities for parents to bond with children and for children to make new friends in the neighbourhood. A big park is also a great place for a child's birthday, giving them the opportunity to run around safely and learn to appreciate nature(http://www.mindingourbodies.ca/about_the_project/literature_reviews/the_nurture_of_nature).

8. Provides Natural Habitat/Ecosystem

The need for more and better parks in our cities isn't just about us. Each park has its own ecosystem. They provide natural habitats for many different animals. As cities grow more and more of these animals find themselves without homes. Parks provide a safe place for many of those displaced by urban

sprawl(http://www.insidetoronto.com/news-story/1936330-high-park-plays-host-and-home-to-various-wildlife/).

Building a healthy network of parks in our city is one major way we can save these animals and preserve local ecosystems. This also makes parks great places to teach children about the environment and the importance of preserving animal life.

Conclusion

Parks are crucial to the healthy development in our city, and should be a major part of any city planning going forward. Parks benefit everyone in the community. They benefit the economy. They provide important habitats for many animals. And those are just a handful of reasons why we need to stand up for the parks in our communities.