

Episode 57: Christian Molstrom

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Hello everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thanks for listening. As always, you can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30 PM or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts. That includes Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, and Amazon Music. And as always, you can find them on our website at childinst.org.

My guest today is Dr. Christian Molstrom. He is an emergency medicine trained physician and currently the medical director for Legacy-GoHealth Urgent Care and they operate about 15 clinics in the Portland and Vancouver region. He's an Oregon native and today we're gonna be talking about summer.

It is July, summer is in full swing, although we've had a little bit of rain recently. But summer is here and people are sending their kids to summer camps, and this is a great time to do that. So we're gonna talk a little bit about what that means and what some of those opportunities are. And maybe what some of the challenges kids face before they go into summer camps.

Dr. Molstrom, Christian, it's great to have you here. Thanks for being on the podcast.

[00:01:04] **Christian Molstrom:** Thank you, Rafael. Appreciate the invitation and I'm really excited to talk about getting kids back outside and being healthy this summer.

[00:01:13] **Rafael Otto:** Well, such an important thing for kids to be outdoors and active. Just talk about some of the benefits of that. The importance of being physically active outdoors and what that means for kids.

[00:01:25] **Christian Molstrom:** Kids normally want to be outside and play and I think that any opportunity that you can get outside with your kids together, either with other families or with your family is vitally important. Especially now that we're... seemed to be coming out of the pandemic. We had a couple summers where people didn't get to travel very much. They may have decided to stay at home. We

had some lockdowns and whatnot. And also a lot of camps were canceled. So for the last couple years, kids may not have gone to any kind of camp at all.

I can tell you from personal experience and also from children that I see, the opportunities to just spend time with other children that are outside of the classroom and that are not necessarily with families, with mom and dad around, are very important from a social standpoint. There's a lot of developments, psychosocial development, that can happen at camps. So, I think that this is, you know, the rain is gone hopefully, and I really hope that a lot of the listeners here have felt comfortable to enroll their kids in some form of camp this summer.

[00:02:35] **Rafael Otto:** Talk about what some of those benefits are. I know that being outdoors can result in reduction in anxiety. It can increase their social network and social connectedness.

What are some of the other benefits?

[00:02:48] **Christian Molstrom:** Well, that's a great point there. We do know that there is an association of depression and anxiety among children. It's been studied more in adolescents and teens, but we all know that the adolescent or the pre-adolescent and the young childhood is a stepping stone to that. And that the depression and anxiety is related to screen time use and sitting inside and being isolated from friends. So camp really gets kids away from their phones. I mean, I think the older kids are probably going to take some of their phones with them to camp and check in on their lunch break or whatnot.

But the point here is that you have extended periods of time where you are engaging with nature, outside with your peers. And this fosters a sense of connectedness and also a sense of autonomy, which I also think is an important part of managing depression, anxiety in children, young adults, even within younger kids that are in grade school. There's a sense of being able to do something on your own is very important and there's no better way to do that than being in a camp away from your regular family setting, with a different set of mentors who are trained to really foster autonomy and self-confidence among children.

[00:04:10] **Rafael Otto:** Can you say more about that? You mentioned the connection between screen time and device use, and maybe it's connected to social isolation. But the connection there between anxiety and depression and what you're seeing.

[00:04:24] **Christian Molstrom:** Well, I think that this is a really complex topic that we don't know perfectly well right now. But what we've seen is an increase in the prevalence of depression and anxiety being associated with screen time.

[00:04:42] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:04:42] **Christian Molstrom:** Now what we're not sure about exactly what the causal relationships are. And we are oftentimes in this conundrum in medicine where we see two things correlated and we suspect that one is causing the other, but we don't know exactly how. And sometimes they're... one thing is not causing the other, but they just simply happened to occur at the same time.

For example, maybe there's something in our food supply that's causing depression, anxiety, but we also happen to be on our screens all the time and so we're making a false connection. Now I'm just saying that as an example. But I think that it's probably reasonable to assume that there is a causal relationship, personally, between screen time and anxiety.

Now not all screen time is the same. We know that watching movies, reading books on the screen, even playing certain kinds of video games, probably don't really worsen anxiety or depression. However, there's other sort of things depending on what your child was doing on social media, for example, and what kind of maybe news they might be exposed to. They could worsen especially if they have an underlying, already a predisposition to anxiety, depression.

Despite all of that, a lot of screen time is kind of solitary, right? And so you are kind of on by yourself with a phone or maybe you're with some other people, but you're still kind of checked out a little bit. And that direct interaction itself can probably have some detrimental effects on a person's sense of being in togetherness, especially a young child, those social interactions are very important. As we get older, I think we develop a sense of awareness where I need social time now. I know how to handle

my private time. You know, a three year old, a five year old, isn't gonna have that awareness, at that age, yeah.

[00:06:38] **Rafael Otto:** And there's a difference for kids that are growing up now that are so immersed in the digital world. Because maybe, you know, we can call them digital natives or whatever the accurate term for that is now. But they're so accustomed to having technology sort of at their fingertips available to them all the time that, that must be creating a different sort of interaction with the technology.

[00:07:04] **Christian Molstrom:** Well, I think you're absolutely right. We are seeing that, uh, well, just across society as a whole. But it's certainly starting at very young ages that we have a... I think a reduced ability to just wait to find something in the environment to stimulate us, that we automatically reach for the phone or the iPad or whatever it is to feed stuff into our brain. There's a very strong dopamine release in the brain when we have exposure to the content that's on our phone and for good reason, I mean, it's very stimulating. There's a lot of colors. There's a lot of interesting, you know, it's a dance on TikTok, it's stuff that we like to see and watch, or it is stuff that's emotionally stimulating for better or worse.

But what it does is that we've now lost, or we seem to be losing, the ability to just sit still or to go out and find something interesting or curious in the grass, or on the tree, or just paying attention to our kind of "quotidian" environment. And I think that... I don't know exactly how that feeds into the anxiety and, and depression.

But one part of anxiety and depression is the person's ability to cope with stressors. So a lot of this is how do you respond to things, right? Our entire life is about stress. I mean, that is life, that's life for humans, for animals, for everything, right. As soon as we're born, we are exposed to stressors. We're exposed to challenges and a lot of those are very simple and we learn them and we figure out how to get through them. Some of them are more difficult and some of them we don't get through. But that response, how resilient you are to coping with something, is an underlying factor with anxiety, depression.

And I do wonder how much the screen time affects our ability to sort of, respond to stress in a way that's healthy and natural.

[00:09:04] **Rafael Otto:** I imagine then being able to spend time outdoors and, you know, maybe it's with... maybe it's with family as well, but having that opportunity to engage with a peer group, with friends in sort of a structured outdoor space and environment could be something that would provide some benefits to that or maybe offset what you're talking about.

[00:09:25] **Christian Molstrom:** Absolutely, yeah. I think direct interaction with individuals, as opposed to going virtually through your phone where so much is lost, right? Tone is lost, body language is oftentimes lost. There are things where you will choose to communicate something differently if the individual's in front of you. I mean, that is how our brains are wired. Our brains are wired to communicate in person with another individual face to face. And I think that when you put a piece of technology in there, you have to learn a different way to communicate with people. Young individuals will need to learn that.

But I think that there can be some unhealthy ways in which people learn to communicate when you don't have that immediate interaction with an individual. Quite honestly, I think that your kids are going to be more respectful to each other when they're in person and without the device.

So anyway, to get back to the camp, you have a lot like going to school and being in school. You are in the situation where kids have to communicate directly with each other. And I think that forces, to a certain extent, it forces a certain amount of like, checking what they're saying and how respectful they are to their people. That whether they're friends or they're not their friends or new people, that they're learning.

And also just, I think meeting new people. This is a skill which we take for granted, I think when we're adults. But this is something that, you know, some young children are really good at this. They have no problems with just meeting strangers. Others it's not natural and camp is a great way to help foster that in, hopefully, a safe environment. You know, children may get comfortable at school because eventually these are all their friends, they see them every day. But I think that, that camp is now

you've got a whole different set of peers you're gonna have for, you know, a week or two. And that's important to sort out. How do I connect with this person that I haven't seen before? Who I don't know, anyway, so...

[00:11:32] **Rafael Otto:** You've talked a little bit about the aspect of communication, and I think this has been true in the pandemic. We've had to like, learn how to figure out how to meet virtually or work remotely with each other. And kids have had to do this too.

And I'll just share an example of my youngest daughter during the pandemic, going through third grade and really, really struggling with the fact that she was trying to interact with her classmates on the computer or even with her teacher and, no satisfaction at all in having to email her teacher a question or something like that. But there was a lot of strain around that. And I think one of the things that she missed most was the sort of social community that she had in her grade. And by taking that away, she had to try to find ways to still engage or communicate with people, even though it was through screens.

I felt like you're getting at some of that, like it's a different kind of skillset that we've had to learn. And I think maybe the pandemic forced us to learn that a little bit, but also a difficult one to grasp.

[00:12:41] **Christian Molstrom:** Yeah, I had a third, fourth grader in the pandemic and an older child. And, uh, my younger kid, same thing. I think every parent has got this same story, same experience where if they have a school-aged child, that it was really tough doing virtual learning. What I noticed, and also talking with my son's friends, was that there's only so much attention that I think a... say a third grader can spend without having all of the different sensory areas stimulated.

[00:13:17] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:13:18] **Christian Molstrom:** When you're on virtual, it's really just some visual and some audio, but you're not up using your hands. And if you go to a third grade classroom, the scissors are out the glue is out. I mean, they're making things, they're

moving around. It's very much of like all five senses are being used and stimulated. I mean, high schoolers, the cognitive part is in place and it's... the learning is more intellectual. But in the younger... for the younger children, they need to be using their body and touching things, and that's impossible to do virtually. And I think that kids just quickly, in 10 minutes, they're done, I'm done like listening to my teacher talk.

[00:13:59] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:13:59] **Christian Molstrom:** And my kids, it was just funny to watch, like, just watch the other kids because you know, there would be like, the cameras should be on and you could just see them just try to check out.

[00:14:09] **Rafael Otto:** Right,

[00:14:09] **Christian Molstrom:** Not paying attention. But I think that, uh, it's... hopefully we never need to go back to virtual learning. If we do, somebody is going to have to come up with a better way to do virtual learning. And it may just be that it's just not the thing that is appropriate in any kind of way. I mean, it can be an adjunct, but it can't be the sole way of having an experience, an educational experience for a kid, for a child... a young child at least.

[00:14:39] **Rafael Otto:** What are you doing this summer with your kids? How are you getting outside?

[00:14:42] **Christian Molstrom:** So a couple things. So I love to get them on the bike. I think bike riding is fabulous. It's a great skill. You can get around town without getting in the car. And, it also allows kids to learn some safety in terms of using the road, sharing the road with the cars. At a certain age, you need to get the kids off of the sidewalk and into the street and with you, and there's a whole other set of awareness. What's going on?

[00:15:11] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:15:12] **Christian Molstrom:** What is this car doing? Oh, they're stopping now. Why are they stopping? We need to wait for them. So things that we take for granted as an adult. But kids don't think about this. Young children don't think about this. Usually they're in the back seat of your car and they're just going along for the ride. So now, now they need to be an active participant in their safety. And so I think the bike is important. Usually if they're just playing, kids aren't gonna play in the street so much, unless you've got a quiet street and, you know, they can set something up out there.

Biking also allows you to just, like I said, get places, uh, a little further than you would normally do with walking. Allows you to sort of explore the city and do some fun stuff like that.

[00:15:50] **Rafael Otto:** It's also something you can do right from your house.

[00:15:53] **Christian Molstrom:** Absolutely.

[00:15:54] **Rafael Otto:** Easy to access.

[00:15:55] **Christian Molstrom:** Super easy to access, exactly. So the other things, uh, I like to do my kids sometimes can be difficult, doing hiking. I think there's some children who are just... they're born and they love to hike. I think other kids, it can be... you need to sort of have a little bit of a goal there for them, to get them outdoors on a hike. Treats and snacks, whatever they like, are great incentives. And make sure that they know that those will be along the hike, there'll be something fun at the end of the hike, maybe going for ice cream or something like that. And, and I make sure that I tell them I really appreciate that they went on the hike. I always try to engage with what we're doing. Like, " Hey, let's stop here and just look around and see what we can see. Let's look at the plants, let's find some bug, let's like... what kind of sounds do we hear?" And things like that.

So it's not just going on a walk that happens to be on a trail outside, but we're actually in a different environment. We're not in the city. I also do a couple camping trips a year. Last couple years we've been going rafting. So this is really exciting. Now I'm not a rafter. I don't have all of this stuff myself, so I have a guided tour. Rafting can

be dangerous and it's important that make sure you're safe and have a guide that knows what they're doing.

But it also allows me to not have to worry about all this planning. I can spend just the time with my family and my kids on the rafting trip. So, and those are overnight trips, which are basically like camping on the river. Really, really, really fun.

[00:17:25] **Rafael Otto:** Sounds great. Thinking about summer camps and sending kids to camp, I also want to be aware of what's happening with COVID. I know that we still need to be aware of its impacts on our community. And so what do parents and families need to know about sending their kids to an outdoor camp or camps at this time of year in terms of COVID safety?

[00:17:47] **Christian Molstrom:** So there's a couple things. So the first one is just understanding what the camp's policy is around COVID and there's gonna be a couple things there. One will be, do they require testing or not to enter the camp? And if it's a daily camp, do they have to have a negative test every single day? That would be pretty onerous for most families and I don't think that that would be very common. But if it's at least... if it's maybe an away camp, then, you know, a single test that sort of start the camp would be I think relatively common and reasonable.

And the other thing would be vaccination requirements and understanding what those are. And if the child isn't vaccinated, are there special things that need to happen in order to participate in the camp?

The third thing is, is what is the camp doing if somebody is sick? So what is it kind of their sick child policy? Do they have antigen testing at the camp? Do they basically make a decision and send somebody home or ask the parents to come pick up the child. So those are all important things. I think that in reality, the current strain of COVID is fairly contagious and some of this stuff is gonna sneak into camp.

I don't think that it's a hundred percent possible to absolutely keep COVID out of the camps. It's a virus and all respiratory viruses can be very sneaky. A child can have a negative test, but may be exposed the day before. And so they're in that prodromal

period and they end up going to camp, and they get a runny nose or maybe no symptoms at all.

So this is a thing. Children can oftentimes have very, very mild symptoms. They can masquerade as simple allergies. And the really challenging thing for doctors is a child that actually does have environmental allergies. And then a case of COVID could look entirely the same, just a little bit of runny nose. The child may not report anything to the camp counselor saying like, "Oh, I feel a little sick," because maybe they're just thinking it's allergies or they don't even think about it quite honestly.

[00:19:49] **Rafael Otto:** Or it's just very, very mild.

[00:19:50] **Christian Molstrom:** Yeah, very, very much. I think any child that has like, fevers, they're gonna be down and out. It's gonna be really obvious that they're sick. They're gonna say something. But a lot of kids are not gonna get probably that level of illness with the Omicron variants that we're seeing. So, understand what the camp's COVID policy is. So the vaccines, is testing required, and then what's the sick child policy.

Those three things.

[00:20:13] **Rafael Otto:** Any other tips for parents, families as they're sending kids to camp?

[00:20:17] **Christian Molstrom:** There's all of the stuff that can happen at camp in terms of injuries and illnesses and things like that. And those are important, I think, to maybe talk to your child about, and have a little bit of preparation. Depending on the camp, this is the other thing as a parent, you wanna know what does the camp provide in terms of... is there something like a nurse available at the camp?

I mean, every camp's gonna have some basic first aid. But like, to what level do they have epinephrines for example, for kids that have anaphylaxis, if they get a bee sting? Or what do they do if a kid has a serious, say, extremity injury, what is their plan? Do they call an ambulance or do they transport them themselves? So I think

just inquiring some common things, like making sure that the camp has a plan. And if they've got a somewhat of a medically trained professional.

Now, I'm not saying that it's a bad camp if they don't. I'm just saying like, it's important to know that going into it.

[00:21:18] **Rafael Otto**: Sure.

Well, Christian, really appreciate the conversation and the tips. And, I hope you can enjoy the outdoors this year.

[00:21:24] **Christian Molstrom**: Likewise, thank you very much.