

## SUMMER FUN

# The Benefits of Outdoor Activity for Children

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Summer is in the air and it's about time to kick back and enjoy those long summer days. Think back to your fondest summer memories of childhood. What comes to mind? I would bet that most of you would talk about that time you made a tree house with your dad, or long summer days playing in the woods and running through the nearby creek unsupervised for hours on end.

Many children today, however, do not have these experiences. Children today play outside less often and for briefer periods. They have more restricted home ranges and are more likely to be able to tell you the names of Pokémon characters than the names of trees in their own backyard.

We are just starting to understand the many effects of this change on our youth's wellbeing. Playtime, especially unstructured, imaginative, exploratory play, is increasingly recognized as an essential component of wholesome child development. It is also recognized that children are also more physi-

cally active when they are outside.

### Key Benefits

**Healthier kids.** Outdoor activity can improve children's health by helping to prevent and treat obesity and associated health problems, as well as mental health issues. One study at the University of Washington of almost 4,000 children found that children living in greener areas have a lower body mass index and gained weight more slowly over the study period than children with less access to green space.

Additionally, Cornell University environmental psychologists found that a view of nature can help protect children against stress and that nature in or around the home appears to be a significant factor aiding the psychological wellbeing of children. And a recent study in Illinois of 400 children diagnosed with ADHD found a link between the children's

routine play settings and the severity of their symptoms. Those that play in outdoor settings with lots of green have milder ADHD symptoms than those who play indoors or in built outdoor environments.

Natural settings can also play a significant role in helping traumatized children. Nature can provide a place for children to clear their minds and reflect in solitude after going through an upsetting time in their life.

**Increase social interaction.** One reason for the emotional benefits of nature may be that green space promotes social interaction and thereby fosters social support. Studies are finding that outdoor kids are better able to relate to other children and adults and have more realistic life expectations. A Swedish study found that children and parents who live in places that allow for outdoor access have twice as many friends as those who have restricted outdoor access due to traffic.

**Improved school performance.** Research indicates that additional time spent outdoors in physical activity may bring about increases in students grade point averages and help them to have better ability to concentrate, sharper memories, and greater school satisfaction. A growing body of research is also making the case for how natural outdoor spaces – such as groves of trees, natural play areas, and school gardens – add to a student's desire to learn and

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facilitates the overall learning process. For example, a recent Los Angeles Time article tells the story of how students became fascinated by the nature unfolding at Leo Politi Elementary School in Los Angeles County after they ripped out 5,000 square feet of concrete and planted native flora in a corner of their campus. Students became so fascinated that fifth grade science test scores rose sixfold.

**Enhanced creativity.** Nature can enhance creativity, problem solving, self-esteem, and self-control. Studies in the U.S., Sweden, Australia, and Canada of children in schoolyards with both green areas and manufactured play areas found that children engaged in more creative forms of play in green areas, such as more fantasy and make-believe play. They are more likely to create their own games in play environments dominated by natural areas rather than solely playground structures.

**Parent-child engagement.** Nature also provides increased opportunities for parents to fully engage with their children – be it playing together at the beach, walking in the woods, or fishing together. This engagement provides a range of benefits for the wellbeing of children.

### How to Get Involved

Pediatricians and other public health officials, parents, schools, natural resource agencies, and many others can play an important part in encouraging kids to get outdoors. Pediatricians can consider “prescribing” outdoor play for physical and mental health benefits. Particular emphasis should be on unstructured, exploratory play. Parents (and other extended family members) can have a tre-



mendous effect by making sure that kids get outdoor play time every day. When possible, they can walk or bike to school with their kids. They can also limit the time that their kids spend on electronic devices and model sensible use of these devices. Parents can advocate for schools to offer more outdoor time and outdoor education programs for their students and can encourage their pediatricians to consider prescribing nature and recommending sensible use of electronics.

One simple way that schools can have a considerable effect is just by making sure kids get enough recess time. Most elementary schools in the U.S. have trimmed

back recess to allow more time for test preparation and classroom lessons. They can also green the schools- studies have shown the soothing effects of greenery on children in a learning environment - and include the study of local flora and fauna in lessons.

Natural resource agencies are also promoting more outdoor time for kids. The US Forest Service and the National Environmental Education Foundation, for example, have teamed up to train health care providers to take a child’s environmental history and give patients and their guardians a written prescription for outdoor activity, connecting them with a local forest or other natural area. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife’s School Backyard program ([www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/schoolyd.htm](http://www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/schoolyd.htm)) helps teachers and students create wildlife habitat on school grounds.

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