

Go Play Outside! The benefits of outdoor time for kids

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What is Nature Deficit Disorder?

It's not an official medical diagnosis... it's a term coined by Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods, to describe the limited exposure to nature experienced by many children today. This is a sample of surveys from the U.S., U.K, Australia, Denmark and other countries:

	Today's adults say that when they were kids...	Today's children
Play(ed) outside every day	71%	21%
Play(ed) outdoors more often than in	73%	13%
Climb(ed) trees	64%	20%
Had a patch of nature near house	75%	64%
Went to patch of nature 1-2 times a week	50%	<25%
Visit natural setting every day in summer	59% of grandparents, 42% of parents	26%
Close enough to walk or bike to school	75%	37%

This is despite the fact that in these surveys, the majority of parents say their kids should spend more time outside and that they like being outside, and the majority of kids wish for more outside time.

The reasons given by parent and kids for not going outside? They're too busy / too many scheduled activities. It's not safe to go outside (traffic, stranger danger, etc.). It's too expensive or too far to travel to outdoor recreation. When they do go play outside, there's no other kids to play with...

So, does it matter? Is there any harm in this reduced connection to nature? Yes. Possible risks of nature deficit include vitamin D deficiency, nearsightedness, obesity, asthma, allergies, ADHD and depression. On the other hand, there are lots of benefits to outdoor time!

Cognitive Benefits of Outdoor Play:

- *Exploring and investigating:* There are always new things to find outside. This helps keep the spark of curiosity burning in a child, and creates a passion for learning.
- *Imagination and symbolic play:* Most manufactured toys are designed for one specific type of play and the child can tell how they're "supposed" to play with it. In the outdoors, they create meaning. A stick can become a sword, or a magic wand, or a walking staff, or a fishing pole.
- *Building:* Kids love to build sand castles on the beach, dams in a stream and fairy houses in the woods. These tasks build large and small motor skills and persistence: kids remain dedicated as they fail again and again, then get it right, only to have waves sweep it away.
- *Self-direction, control and mastery:* There's no right or wrong way to play outdoors, so children are free to create their own ways to play, continue a game for as long as it pleases, then evolve a new one. This gives kids a huge sense of empowerment and competence.

Mood and Concentration Benefits of Outdoor Time:

Outdoor time allows kids to "burn off energy." When kids are indoors, we're often saying "quiet voice" and "don't make a mess." Outdoors they can be loud and move fast; they can push boundaries and take risks. This helps them regulate mood and emotions better when they return inside.

The outdoors also soothes us. Cities and built environments are full of intense stimuli that demand our attention dramatically: honking horns, flashing lights, text messages buzzing. These trigger the sympathetic nervous system to respond. The adrenaline rush we get is great at helping us focus on the action we need to take right now, but operating this way long-term is very stressful.

Outdoor environments have plenty to look at – but it's less dramatic. Outside, we relax and gaze around without needing tight focus. This triggers the parasympathetic system, which conserves energy, so the body can heal itself. Rather than "fight or flight", this is called "rest and digest."

Spending time in nature lowers pulse rates and blood pressure, and increases physical and mental energy. And when someone returns indoors, they are better able to focus. Thus: kids behave better in the classroom if they have recess and kids with ADHD concentrate much better after outdoor time.

Physical Benefits of Outdoor Play:

- *More ways of moving.* In a gymnastics or soccer class, children use specific muscle groups to accomplish specific tasks. During free play in the outdoors they discover all the ways their bodies can move, as they scramble under low branches, climb rocks, step over brambles...
- *More chances to customize* experience to ability (e.g. choose how high up the tree to climb, choose fatter or skinnier logs to balance on, choose the steeper or less steep parts of the hill)
- *More variability* in surfaces requires kids to adapt their movement (e.g. unlike a playground ladder, on a tree there's a variety of sizes of branches and a range in distance between them)
- *Challenges grow with a child:* modern playgrounds are much safer for younger children, but that means kids over age 8 find them limiting and boring; nature always offers new challenges

Health Benefits of Outdoor Time:

- *More exercise:* kids who play outside are more physically active than those who play inside.
- *Lower obesity rates*
- *Better vision:* For every hour per week a child spends outdoors, chance of myopia drops 2%
- Lower stress levels, lower rates of many diseases, less asthma, reduced circulatory disease.
- *Essential Vitamin D:* protects children from future bone problems and heart disease.

Social Benefits of Outdoor Time:

- *Social interaction:* Many parents observe that their children seem to make friendships quickly in outdoor settings. Multi-age: Outdoor settings that encourage free play often attract a wide range of ages, unlike structured recreational activities. This encourages multi-age friendships.
- *Concern for the Environment:* Kids who have spent time outside care more about their world.

Barriers to going outside and steps you can take now to overcome them

Perceived barrier: Lack of access to nature (too expensive, too far away, lack the skills/knowledge)

Outdoor time doesn't just mean hiking in a rainforest or a weeklong camping trip in Yellowstone. It could mean just a little time outside every day on that little strip of grass at the corner of the apartment parking lot. It could be walking to school instead of driving, and noticing the plants, rocks and bugs in the neighbors' yards. It could mean finding a little "patch of nature" that you can visit once a week. Maybe that's a city park, but maybe it's an empty lot in a residential neighborhood. Or maybe you look a little further afield, and find hiking trails, lakes, streams, arboretums, botanical gardens, farms, nature preserves, beaches, sandboxes, and other places to dig in the dirt. And for most of them, you can bring a picnic lunch and stay all day without spending any money.

If you feel like you lack the knowledge or skills for outdoor adventures, start small and simple with visits to the local park. When you're ready, take on new challenges on your own. Or visit outdoor supply stores and check with your parks department for classes or group outings with an experienced guide. Check out websites for tips on outdoor time. Try www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/family.html

Perceived barrier: Safety

- *Traffic*: Choose play areas with minimal traffic risks. Teach pedestrian safety (use crosswalks, look both ways, don't run into the street after a ball). Don't allow kids to play in the street.
- *Stranger danger*: Teach your child reasonable precautions, without frightening them. Some basics: it's OK to talk to strangers when mom or dad are with you, but not when they're not. Be sure your children know their full names, parents' phone numbers, and address.
- *Risk of injury in outdoor settings*: In nature, there may be sharp edges and hard surfaces and thorns. Whenever you're outdoors with your child, be aware of potential hazards, show them to her and educate her about how to be safe if she encounters them on solo adventures.
- Although there are potential risks outdoors, staying indoors all the time also carries risks: increasing the long-term chances of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, etc.

Perceived barrier: No time in the schedule

- *Homework*: Remember that spending time outside before doing homework may actually mean kids will concentrate better, and homework might take *less* time in the end!
- *Extracurriculars*: Children certainly benefit from organized activities that teach specific skills (e.g. piano lessons, baseball) but there are unique benefits to unstructured play, especially outdoors. Finding a balance in the schedule is best for maximizing learning potential.
- *Parents' work and other commitments* limit the time they can spend outdoors with their kids: Can your time do double-duty? Can you work or work-out outdoors? Can you walk to the store instead of driving? Consider looking for a *nature-based preschool* or *"forest kindergarten"* so your child can get school time and outdoor time at the same time!

Perceived barrier: Outdoor play is inconvenient for parents

- *Dirty clothes and dirty kids*: Outdoor play is definitely messy. Carry a full extra set of clothes along, including socks and shoes. And a towel and water for a scrub down when needed.
- *Parents' responsibilities*: Parents say it's hard to get things done (like cooking dinner) if the child is playing outside and needs to be supervised.
 - Can the child play outside without supervision (with clear boundaries /safety proofing?)
 - Can you team up with another parent and take turns supervising?
 - Can you take any work outside? With mobile devices, you can handle calls, read email, catch up on Facebook, or read materials for work while your child plays.

Perceived barrier: Kids don't like to play outside because it's uncomfortable

- *Too hot*: Plan your outings for early in the morning, or late in the evening. Consider lightweight sun-protective clothing, and a lightweight hat with a brim.
- *Too cold / too wet*: Teachers at outdoor programs often say "there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing." It's well worth investing in a good pair of waterproof boots, rain gear, and cold weather gear. Search online for tips for dressing kids for outdoor play.

Perceived barrier: Kids aren't interested in playing outside

- *Screens*: Parents often assume a child would rather stay inside and watch TV / play video games / use the computer. But when surveyed, many kids say they prefer outdoor time.
 - Sometimes transitions are the hard part – you may have to force the issue of turning off the screen and getting out, but after a while they'll settle in and have fun.
- "*There's nothing to do!*" If you have a child who is used to the high intensity stimulation of video games and amusement parks, it can be hard to slow down to enjoy the quieter pleasures of the outdoors. Having ideas for what to do outdoors may help.
 - Invest in outdoor toys (sandbox, kiddie pool, bikes, balls... even simple things like spray bottle or bubble wands she can only play with outdoors can entice her outside)
 - Find interesting things to collect like rocks or acorns. Take home one as a treasure.
 - Try outdoor scavenger hunts. For older kids, try geocaching or letterboxing.
 - Encourage pretend play outside: pretend to be animals, pretend to be Bigfoot.
 - Set themes for the day, like an animal of the day, sense of the day, or bug of the day.
 - Search online for more ideas. Try nwf.org and projectwildthing.com to start.

Perceived barrier: There's no one to play with outside

- Find families who are like spending time outdoors: Check out your local parks department, campgrounds, and outdoor supply stores for classes, camps, and guided hikes. When you attend, network with other parents. You can also search online (Meetup.com, Facebook, childrenandnature.org) for "children and nature" groups, or look for local outdoors clubs.
- Encourage your existing circle of friends to play outdoors: When it's your turn to host a playdate, make it an outdoor one. (Even if it's a rainy day, spend at least some time out.)
- Connect with the neighbor kids and parents. Let them know that you'd love a neighborhood where kids play outside together. Try setting an "outdoor hour" at least once a week when everyone tries to get their kids out together and where kids can rotate between multiple yards. Set one day a week as "walk to school" day. Or organize "walk-pools."

Perceived barrier: "I'm just not an outdoors person – I don't want to take my kid outside"

Some parents feel like they *should* get their kids outside more. But they find themselves dreading outdoor time because they have not enjoyed it in the past. It's OK to start small, and with simple things that seem manageable to you. Yes, some parents take their kids wilderness camping or mountain biking or white water rafting. Maybe you just take your child to the playground often, or walk at botanical gardens, or go to the zoo, or just notice nature around you as you shop downtown. Do what you can. You may find that as you start small and have experiences you enjoy you may become more of an outdoors person and look forward to these times.

What will you do?

Some experts recommend that parents commit to a "green hour" – one hour a day that their kids spend outside. Does that seem do-able to you? Could you make that a goal to shoot for, even if you know there's lots of days you won't make it? (On the days you do, congratulate yourself!)

By spending time with our kids outdoors, we can develop life-long habits of getting outside and being active. This will mean our kids experience less stress, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, ADHD and sensory issues, and depression. And they'll probably do better in school. It's well worth the effort!