

## The Importance of Outdoor Experiences in the Primary Years

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Daily experiences in natural environments can have immediate and long-lasting benefits for children. Increased physical activity is associated with decreases in depression and anxiety and increases in levels of concentration. It also is a key strategy in addressing childhood obesity.

Research overwhelmingly supports the need for children to experience natural environments often and in a variety of ways. For many reasons, children are spending increasing amounts of time inside the house watching television and playing video games. Also, many schools are cutting recess times or eliminating recess all together in favor of spending more time during the day focusing on academic skills. According to research, children who play outdoors regularly:

- become fitter and leaner;
- develop stronger immune systems;
- have more active imaginations;
- have lower stress levels;
- play more creatively; and
- have greater respect for themselves and others.

Daily experiences in the out-of-doors promote and strengthen many aspects of learning and development. Natural environments have a calming effect on children and help them to be more focused and less distracted. Within the last decade, a large body of research has emerged that examines how the natural world influences development and learning. This research has linked several health and learning issues to a lack of both children and adults engaging in regular experiences in the natural world. Let's consider some of the consequences of our lifestyles:

- Two out of every 10 children in the United States are clinically obese, and that rate has quadrupled in the last three decades.

- There has been a large increase in the use of behavioral medications for young children, with the largest increase (66 percent) in the use of antidepressants for preschoolers.
- Prescription drug use for the treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is also skyrocketing.
- In the last decade, the appearance of socially inappropriate behaviors in children and their difficulty in relating to others has become glaringly apparent.

### The Nature Effect: Benefits for Children

The benefits of spending time in nature have been widely documented in recent years. Research has shown that nature benefits children (and adults) in:

- enhancing cognitive growth (thinking skills);
- developing greater ability to handle negative stress;
- increasing creativity;
- developing more resistance to depression; and
- decreasing symptoms of ADHD.

For children living in highly stressed families and households, nature provides an outlet to express emotions and allows children time to make sense of their world. Researchers from Cornell University (2003) found that a room with a view of nature can help buffer children from stress, and that nature, either in or around the home, appears to be a strong factor in protecting the psychological well-being of children in rural areas. Stressful life situations appear to be buffered by exposure to environments where natural surroundings and experience in nature are accessible.

Exposure to nature has been linked to several positive learning outcomes. Cross-national studies have found that children who played in green areas showed more creativity, which is a necessary skill for learning and producing knowledge

and ideas. To be successful in the 21st century, children will need to become generators of knowledge and ideas requiring the ability to think creatively.

Additionally, time spent in nature has been linked to an increase in development and competence in social skills. Researchers have also found that when children play in spaces dominated by natural elements and landscapes, they are likely to engage in more fantasy play, and their social relationships are based more on their language skills, creativity, and inventiveness rather than on their physical competence.

Children who present symptoms of ADHD can benefit from time in nature, and, in fact, some believe that a deficiency in nature exposure leads to the need for prescription drugs. Researchers have found that being close to nature or in nature has the following benefits for children with ADHD:

- Helps to boost children's attention spans, which is one of the most prominent symptoms of an ADHD diagnosis.
- Fosters creative play, improves children's access to positive adult interaction, and relieves the symptoms of attention deficit disorders.
- Children who are unmedicated but diagnosed with ADHD are more able to pay attention after a simple 20-minute walk in a park than they are after a walk through well-kept downtown or residential areas.
- Greenery in a child's environment, even through windows, has a significant impact on the reduction of symptoms associated with ADHD. Researchers also concluded that while any outdoor space or activity seemed to help reduce the symptoms, environments with trees and grass were the most beneficial in the reduction of symptoms.

### Putting It All Together

Daily experiences in natural environments can have immediate and long-lasting benefits for both children and adults. Outdoor spaces allow children to run, climb, move through space, and "let off steam." Such increased physical activity is associated with decreases in depression and anxiety, and increases in levels of concentration. Outdoor experiences and play is a key strategy to address rising childhood obesity rates and ADHD/ADD symptoms. Nature provides endless opportunities for awe, wonder, exploration, and movement — all essential elements to promoting the healthy well-being of young children.

### Resources

A Kindergarten for the 21st Century: Nebraska's Kindergarten Position Statement: <http://www.education.ne.gov/oec/pubs/KStatement.pdf>

Texts4Teachers: <http://extensiontexts.unl.edu>

The Learning Child: [www.extension.unl.edu/child](http://www.extension.unl.edu/child)

Richard Louv's website: <http://richardlouv.com/>

Green Hearts Inc.: [http://www.greenheartinc.org/About\\_Us.html](http://www.greenheartinc.org/About_Us.html)

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