

# Go Play Outside! The benefits of outdoor play for kids

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## **What is Nature Deficit Disorder?**

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. Modern children are far less likely than their parents' generation to play outdoors, climb trees, and walk to school. Possible risks of nature deficit include vitamin D deficiency, nearsightedness, obesity, asthma, allergies, ADHD and depression. How do we prevent it? Frequent doses of free, unstructured play outdoors!

## **Mood and Concentration Benefits of Outdoor Time:**

Outdoor time allows kids to burn off energy. They can be loud, move fast, push boundaries and take risks. This helps them regulate energy and emotions better when they return inside. All kids behave better in school if they have recess. Kids with ADHD especially concentrate better after outdoor time.

## **Cognitive Benefits of Outdoor Play:**

- *Exploring & investigating*: There are always new things to find outside. Keeps curiosity alive!
- *Imagination and symbolic play*: Most manufactured toys are designed for one specific type of play. Outdoors, kids create meaning. A stick becomes a sword, a magic wand, or a fishing pole.
- *Building*: Stick houses or sand castles build large and small motor skills and persistence: kids try and fail again and again, then get it right. No cleanup needed - wind or waves sweep it away.
- *Self-direction, control and mastery*: There's no right or wrong way to play, so children are free to create their own adventures, continue a game for as long as it pleases, then evolve a new one.

## **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 a rocky hillside, 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 designed to be safe for young kids, but that means kids over age 7 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 and have *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.

## **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 skills / knowledge)

Outdoor time doesn't just mean hiking in a rainforest or a weeklong camping trip in Yellowstone. It could mean a little time outside every day on a little strip of grass in an apartment parking lot. It could be walking to school instead of driving, noticing the plants, rocks and bugs in the neighbors' yards. It could mean finding a "patch of nature" to visit once a week - maybe a landscaped office park. Try taking classes at your parks department or join group outings to learn more about nature. More tips at: [www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/family.html](http://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/family.html) (note: you don't need to buy the products they mention!)

Perceived barrier: Safety

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. So, it's worth getting outdoors! When you're out with your child, be aware of potential risks, show them to your child and educate them about how to be safe. Prepare, don't scare.

Perceived barrier: No time in the schedule

If your child is all booked up with piano lessons and baseball and so on, remember that although kids benefit from those specific skills, there are unique benefits to unstructured play, especially outdoors. Finding a balance in the schedule is best for maximizing learning potential. If you're worried about them getting homework done: Remember that spending time outside before doing homework may actually mean kids will concentrate better, and homework will take *less* time! If *your* schedule limits outdoor time, think of ways your time can do double-duty – can you work outdoors while they play? When choosing extracurricular activities - could you choose outdoor activities for them instead of all indoors?

Perceived barrier: Kids don't like being too hot, too cold, too wet. Parents don't like the mess.

Teachers at outdoor preschools say "there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing." Invest in good boots and clothes for all weather. (See [www.oakiwear.com](http://www.oakiwear.com)) Also, since outdoors can be messy, carry extra clothes along, a plastic bag for muddies, a towel and water for a scrub down. Search online for helpful tips for dressing for outdoor play on hot, cold or wet days.

Perceived barrier: Kids aren't interested in playing outside

Parents often assume a child would rather stay inside on screens. But when surveyed, many kids say they prefer outdoor time. Often the transitions are the hard part – you may have to force the issue of turning off the screen and getting out, but once they get outdoors, they settle in and have fun. If they complain that there's nothing to do, buy some outdoor toys or sports equipment, let them collect nature treasures, or try outdoor scavenger hunts. Ideas: [nwf.org](http://nwf.org).

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

Find families who like spending time outdoors: Check out your local parks department, outdoors clubs, campgrounds, and outdoor stores for classes, camps, and guided hikes. Encourage your existing friends to play outdoors: plan playdates at the park. Connect with your neighbor kids.

What will you do? Some experts recommend parents commit to a "green hour" – one hour every 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!)

For more details, citations of sources, and recommended resources, go to [www.gooddayswithkids.com](http://www.gooddayswithkids.com), search for "nature".

Videos: Nature Play Promo [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4OSOAdpoAE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4OSOAdpoAE); Nature at Home:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKCVrTQIyYs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKCVrTQIyYs) More videos: [www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-outdoor-education-resources](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-outdoor-education-resources)