



The Parent Helper
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Outdoor Play Every Day: Children and Nature

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, uses the term, "nature-deficit disorder" to describe what happens to young people who are disconnected from their natural world. He ties this lack of unstructured outside time to depression, attention disorders, and rises in obesity.

There are many reasons why your child is spending less time outdoors than you did. There are fewer green spaces and natural environments. More homes and child care programs have air conditioning. Television and computers take up more time. Your child is probably involved in several organized activities. The media is constantly telling you that things like the ticks, mosquitoes, polluted water, and strangers make the outside a dangerous place. Your child care provider may have limited outdoor space for outdoor play.

Outdoor Time Is Important

We are learning that it is important for children to spend time outdoors without a planned agenda. Children who regularly spend unstructured time outdoors are more likely to:

- Become fitter and leaner
- Develop stronger immune systems
- Experience fewer symptoms of ADD and ADHD
- Play more creatively and have more active imaginations
- Learn how to handle challenges and solve problems
- Experience how things grow, mature, and die
- Develop a sense of wonder and research
- Apply science and math principles to real world situations; and
- Have greater respect for themselves, for others, and for the environment.

Encourage Your Child's Outdoor Play

From your child's infancy on, plan time every day for unstructured outside play. Keep it simple and fun. Start in your backyard and then move to your neighborhood and beyond. Encourage your child to explore with all the senses: hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. After your child is successful with simpler activities, add new and more complex challenges.

Explore in your back yard:

- Look for bugs, birds, trees, and wildflowers.
- Make mud pies. Peek under rocks. Splash through puddles. Climb trees. Build snow men. Rake leaves and jump in them. Watch the stars and find constellations. Find quiet places to read and reflect.
- Plant easy-to-grow vegetables and flowers in a small garden or wooden planter box. Experience seed planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting.
- Hang a bird feeder. Get a bird guide and record which birds visit the feeder.
- Start a collection of stones, shells, leaves, or bugs.

Investigate your neighborhood:

- Help your child pack an explorer's kit. Include items such as a magnifying glass, binoculars, plastic bags and containers for collecting, field guides, notebook and pencil, camera, water bottle, snack, sunscreen, bug repellent, band-aids, blanket/tarp for sitting on the ground or building forts, and a cell phone.
- Go for a walk. Visit the park. Allow time to run and explore.
- Play by the creek. Go sledding. Build sand castles.
- Visit a nature center.

Bring nature inside your home:

- Get nature guides. Learn to identify trees, leaves, birds, wild flowers, and shells.
- Sing songs and choose stories for your child that feature plants and animals.
- Help your child see how food goes from the garden to the table.

Keep Your Child Safe Outdoors

There are several things you can do to keep your child safe outdoors.

Dress suitably:

- In warm weather, clothing should be light-colored, lightweight, and absorbent.
- In cold weather, clothing should be layered and dry. Check fingers, toes, and ears for normal color and warmth at least every 15 minutes.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and pants tucked into socks for visits to the woods.
- Wear boots for playing in water/creeks.

Protect your child and yourself from the sun:

- Play in the shade.
- Wear hats and protective clothing when playing outdoors between the hours of 10 AM and 2 PM.
- Use sunscreen with UVB-ray and UVA-ray protection of SPF-15 or higher. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before exposure to the sun and every two hours while in the sun. Talk to your doctor before using sunscreen on an infant less than 6 months old.

Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.



For More Information Visit:

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