

“Children grow healthier, wiser, and more content when they are more fully connected throughout their childhood to the natural environment in as many educational and recreational settings as possible. These benefits are long term and significant and contribute to their future wellbeing and the contributions they will make to the world as adults.” ~Reconnecting the World’s Children to Nature “Call to Action”

Benefits of taking kids outside

- 1) Physical and emotional well-being** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 60 minutes of daily unstructured free play as an essential part of children’s physical and mental health and social development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007). Children who play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, less aggressive and show better concentration (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Ginsburg et al., 2007). Play protects children's emotional development; whereas a loss of free time in combination with a hurried lifestyle can be a source of stress, anxiety, and may even contribute to depression for many children.
- 2) Lower levels of childhood obesity** Outdoor play increases physical activity levels and builds active, healthy bodies, an important strategy in addressing the obesity epidemic (CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health, 2008).
- 3) Lower levels of ADHD** Researchers at University of Illinois report findings that indicate exposure to natural settings may be “widely effective” in reducing attention deficit symptoms in children (American Journal of Public Health, 2004).
- 4) Improves concentration and school performance** Offering sufficient outdoor time improves the overall health of our children while lengthening attention spans, diminishing aggressiveness, improving test scores and ultimately advancing learning.
- 5) Sunlight is a natural source of Vitamin D** Lack of outdoor time and inadequate doses of sunlight are creating a generation of children deficient in Vitamin D, setting them up for increased risk of bone problems, heart disease, diabetes, and other health issues (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009).
- 6) Outdoor time improves eyesight** Several studies reported in *Optometry and Vision Science* indicated children who spend more time outside during the day tend to have better distance vision than those who favor indoor activities. A Duke University study found that a child’s chances of becoming nearsighted, if he or she has two nearsighted parents, are about 6 in 10 for children who spend 0-5 hours outside a week, but the risk drops to 2 in 10 when outdoor time exceeds 14 hours a week (The 12th International Myopia Conference, Australia, July 2008).
- 7) Children who play outside grow up to be stewards of the environment** The most direct route to caring for the environment as an adult is participating in “wild nature activities” before the age of 11 (Wells and Lekies, 2006).
- 8) Enhances imagination and sense of wonder and exploration** Kids who play outside are more likely to use their own imaginations, inventions and creativity while playing.
- 9) Better sleep** Outdoor play provides children with the perfect opportunity to run and play which leads to better sleep.
- 10) Children who regularly play outdoors have a greater appreciation of the arts, music, history and literature** Spending time outdoors in nature develops an appreciation for the beauty of nature and all living things, as well as developing creativity and wonder, leading to a greater appreciation of the arts, music, history and literature.

"There is nothing inherently dangerous about a boulder, there is nothing inherently dangerous about a chasm you leap over, nothing inherently dangerous about ... a little stream, there's nothing inherently dangerous about a walk in the woods. There's nothing inherently dangerous about digging in the sand or dirt. You can use all those settings on purpose to hurt yourself. But if you take some care along those lines these things are very, very safe." ~Ron King, Natural Playground Designer

Considerations before stepping out the door

- 1) Check it out** Check out the activity area beforehand. Talk with the site manager if possible. Look for possible hazards such as sharp objects, stinging insects, poison ivy, bodies of water, etc...Plan how you will keep children safe from potential hazards. Check for restroom and drinking water availability.
- 2) Be prepared for emergencies** Have a backpack ready with a cell phone, first aid kit, and emergency information to take with you. Consider including wet wipes, water and appropriate snacks.
- 3) Be weather aware** Before heading out the door check the weather forecast and plan accordingly. During hot weather bring plenty of water and take frequent water breaks in the shade. During cold weather make sure children have adequate warm clothing and footwear. Stay outdoors only as long as is reasonable for everyone's comfort and safety. Have a plan for inclement weather conditions.
- 4) Dress for success** Make sure everyone is dressed appropriately for the weather conditions. Warm clothing and jackets for cold weather conditions, and lightweight clothing and protective sun hats for hot weather conditions.
- 5) Be aware of allergies** Know beforehand if any child has bee, pollen, or food allergies and plan accordingly to prevent exposure.
- 6) Use the buddy system** Make sure everyone has a buddy and instruct them to stay with their buddy at all times. Do frequent head counts. For very young children use a rope for everyone to hold on to as they walk.
- 7) Water safety** Plan for constant supervision if you will be around any water, including a pond, lake, beach, ditch, or creek. Be prepared with life jackets if needed. Instruct children to stay away from water's edge unless accompanied by an adult. Do not allow running or pushing near water.
- 8) Animals & Plants** Be aware of possible wildlife you may see and/or come into contact with. Instruct children not to approach wildlife, teach them to quietly observe the animal and to back away if necessary. Be prepared with insect repellent for mosquitoes and ticks. Cover food and drinks to avoid attracting wasps and other stinging insects. Learn what poison oak, poison ivy and poison sumac look like. Instruct children not to pick or touch plants or mushrooms without adult supervision.
- 9) Wash hands** When you return to the classroom be sure to have children wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- 10) Take only memories; leave only footprints** Teach children about having respect for living things and nature. Set an example for responsible wildlife viewing and nature collecting. Do not litter or otherwise alter the natural area where you are visiting.