

Mental Health Benefits of Outdoor Play

Unstructured outdoor play is something many people of a certain age remember vividly. With little to no adult supervision, we spent whole days outside climbing trees, riding bicycles, building forts, playing in the dirt or in local streams, and anything else we could imagine. While this kind of play is not completely a thing of the past, it seems increasingly rare in an age of electronics, highly structured sports and activity schedules, more crowded urban and suburban environments, and fears for the safety of children. Recognizing that we can't return to the past, we can be more intentional about providing opportunities for children for outdoor play, and especially nature play.

Some research findings about outdoor and nature play:

- Increases fitness levels, raises levels of Vitamin D, improves



- distance vision, and improves motor skills, including coordination, balance, and agility.
- Reduces stress levels and symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Increases critical thinking skills and cognitive development; improves awareness, reasoning, and observation skills; teaches problem-solving skills.
- Protects emotional development, enhances social interactions, and encourages collaboration with others.

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- Encourages imaginative and creative play.
- Encourages independence and autonomy.
- Let's kids be kids.

Ways to encourage outdoor play

- Be a role model and spend time outside yourself, unplugged from technology.
- Set a goal for at least some unstructured outdoor play each day; some recommend at least 60 minutes, but a shorter time is better than none.
- Create outdoor playgroups with other families.
- Encourage your community to develop safe natural outdoor play areas where children can engage in unstructured play.
- Limit screen time and encourage children.
- Advocate for the value of regular play and recess times at school.

R E S O U R C E S

Whole Child: Developing Mind, Body and Spirit through Outdoor Play, National Wildlife Federation. <http://bit.ly/2l41C0j>

Supporting Outdoor Play and Exploration for Infants and Toddlers, Early Head Start. <http://bit.ly/2mzgwMv>

18 ways to get kids to go outside. Active for Life.
activeforlife.com/18-ways-to-get-kids-outside

Encouraging Nature Play. PBS for Parents.
www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/encouraging-nature-play

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

