

Outdoor Learning and Play

by Hannah Kline, NCSU Masters Student, 2011

With busy schedules, community violence, and fear of getting hurt, there are so many reasons why families spend little time outside. As children get older, technology becomes another barrier to spending time outdoors - television, video games, the internet, and iPods, are all things that take up children's time and energy.

Why should children be outside?

Encouraging children to go outside, to get moving, and to connect with nature are all ways to avoid childhood obesity, but there are other benefits too! Kids who play outside are happier, healthier, and stronger!

Moving outside helps with:



Learning

Spending time in nature encourages children's curiosity and creativity. It gets them using their senses - seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling everything around them. Learning is exciting and full of surprises when children spend time outside.

AND...



Health

Getting children outside and moving their bodies helps to fight the risk of obesity and contributes to children's overall health. Fresh air is good for us! Outside play in open, natural spaces has also been shown to calm children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Think back to when you were young: did you enjoy playing outside? What activities did you enjoy? Did you play hide-and-seek? Did you go swimming? Did you plant flowers outside? Did you ride bikes? Children today don't get as much time outside as in the past. As parents and teachers, we can encourage outdoor learning and play, by setting a good example. Active parents = active children. Think of activities that the whole family will enjoy.



Here are some helpful tips for making the most of outdoor learning:

Plan for outdoor time as part of your daily routine. Routines are important for young children because they feel safer when they know what to expect.

Include the whole family. Make learning outside fun by setting an example for your child. If a child sees that their parents are enthusiastic about outdoor learning and play, they will be excited too!

Look Closely. Learn to notice what your child notices. Ask questions. Talk about what you see. What kinds of bird did you stumble upon? What do the flowers smell like? Use it as an opportunity to learn about new things together!

Use All Your Senses. Are the leaves of a plant prickly, hairy, leathery, or smooth? Can you tell what kind of bird that is by the call? When you know it is safe, taste the flowers, herbs, and vegetables. What do you smell?

Take Time. Slow down and let your child explore at their own pace. Try to step into their world by getting down on the child's level and taking in the world around you.

Encourage Curiosity. Ask questions! Encourage your kids to ask questions about what they encounter. Why do you think the sky is blue? Why do bees buzz?

Interact. Give children opportunities to make choices but pay attention to what they want to explore and learn about in their surroundings. Ask questions that stretch their imagination and thinking. Challenge them to notice and interact with the environment around them.

Explore Durham. Visit the library, a nature center, or local parks.

Information based on:

DeBord, K., Bradley, L., Driscoll, L. (2009). At your Doorstep: A family fact sheet on outdoor play & learning