

Benefits of Play in Natural Settings

“Go outside to play!” That’s what parents used to say, but nowadays their children are more likely to hear, “Hurry up, we’ll be late for your lesson!” At a younger and younger age, children are spending their time indoors, often in structured, supervised activities. Parents make this choice because they want to keep their children safe and busy with educational experiences. However, it also means that children have little time left for free play outdoors. Even when they *are* outside, they tend to play on a groomed sports field or in an asphalt-covered schoolyard, climbing on standardized equipment. This trend has led some authors to talk about a “nature deficit.”

Natural playthings

What are children missing by not playing in natural environments? For a start, manmade spaces, with their straight lines and regular angles, lack the variety and novelty of places like forests, fields, beaches, stream banks and gardens. Think of what a baby experiences, sitting in his stroller in the garden, watching the movement of leaves in the breeze. A wind-up mobile over his crib will draw his attention too, but the unpredictability of the leaves and their shadows will hold his interest longer. Building a shelter out of branches and pine boughs in a corner of the park pushes preschoolers to use their creativity and imagination more than simply playing house in a pre-built structure in the schoolyard. Of course we want children to be safe, but there is a balance to be found between safety and allowing them the freedom to explore. Natural materials like twigs, stones, flower petals, shells and logs encourage children to solve problems at their level. Compare the challenge of building a tower or a wall with river stones to building with blocks that come in standard shapes and sizes.

Effects on the brain

People have lived in close contact with nature for most of human history, so it is not surprising that natural environments have positive effects on the human brain, both emotionally and cognitively. Our

intellectual capacities are expanded by living in contact with large numbers of other people in cities, but our body’s alarm systems are triggered by the sudden noises and constant stimulation. Time spent outdoors in nature tends to counteract these stressful effects; the colour green is particularly calming. For instance, studies have shown that:

- having trees and other greenery in the neighbourhood improves residents’ mood, as well as their ability to concentrate and be resilient
- people tend to recover faster from surgery if they can see a natural setting out of their hospital window
- children can focus on a task better after spending 20 minutes in a park compared to their results after a walk down urban streets.

Caring for the planet

If we want the next generation to become ecologically aware, we need to foster their feelings of connection with nature. There’s lots children can learn from books and the Internet about the life of insects, birds and flowers, but nothing beats direct experience of the real thing. All their senses are stimulated, for example, when they lie in the grass watching ants bustle to and fro taking food to their anthill, or when they crouch beside a tide pool to discover the abundance of life in the shallow sea water. It is experiences like these that sow the seeds of environmentally conscious actions.

Sense of wonder

Many scientists, when asked how they chose their career, talk about times they spent playing freely in natural surroundings when they were very young. They had opportunities to try things out at their own pace and discover the diversity and beauty of nature. Not everyone will become a scientist, but all children are curious about how the natural world functions. By making it possible for them to experience nature first hand, we can foster the sense of wonder which will prepare them, not just for school, but for becoming lifelong learners.

by Betsy Mann

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