

## **Children Benefit from Time in Nature**

Kids and the outdoors seem like a natural combination. But today's children spend only about half an hour each week in unstructured play outside — and that's just not enough.

Kids need unstructured time to explore nature at their own pace. While they're at it, they'll develop their observation skills and reduce their stress levels.

Too often busy schedules, fears about safety and the lure of technology keep children away from nature. A growing number of educators and others who work with children are becoming increasingly concerned about this trend away from children having outdoor time. Children need the benefits of spending time outdoors.

Karen DeBord, a child development specialist at North Carolina State University, reports research showing that the strongest indicator of children's physical fitness is time spent outdoors. She cites the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation that children need one hour of vigorous physical activity each day. Often this is most easily achieved when children spend time outside.

Another benefit of children's time outdoors in the natural world is increased attention span. Research shows that children's symptoms of attention deficit disorders decrease when they spend time in nature. In nature's calming environment, children develop their skills at observing things closely — an important part of science skills.

Children's time in nature helps to reduce negative behaviors, as well. Children are less impulsive and have fewer behavior problems when they spend time outdoors. Nature offers opportunities to develop nurturing skills, such as caring for plants in a garden or feeding birds.

Adults can do several things to offer more opportunity for children to spend time outdoors in natural settings.

- Take a walk and carry along a bag to collect nature items.
- Plant some seeds and watch them grow.
- Notice the sights and sounds and talk about what you see and hear.
- Use chalk to draw on the sidewalk.
- Smell flowers and plants.
- Play with blocks and other building materials outside.
- Use paper and drawing materials to create some nature art.
- Create a special place for children to dig in the dirt outside.
- Take musical instruments and materials outside. Let kids bang on a pot or hit sticks together to create sounds.
- Take a blanket outdoors and read books with children.
- Bury some items in a sand box and let children find them as they would in an archeological dig.

When you spend time outdoors with children be curious. Notice things like bugs and trees and comment on them. Ask questions and listen to children's answers. Invite children to explore and learn from nature by touching, smelling and listening.

There also is a long-term benefit to time outdoors. Children who spend time in nature are more likely to care for the earth as they grow and become adults. As children discover the role that the environment plays in our lives and the resources it provides, they are more likely to be good caretakers of the natural world.