



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Your Family & Nature

Getting Outside is Easy and Fun!

Nature-Deficit Disorder

The American people, especially children, spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation. Recent research shows that our nation's children are suffering from too much time inside. Kids today spend an average of 6.5 hours/day with television, computers and video games. In fact, a child is six times more likely to play a video game than to ride a bike.

What does this mean? If children are raised with little or no connection to nature, they may miss out on the many health benefits of playing outdoors. Nature is important to children's development - intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and physically.

As children's connection to and time spent in nature has declined, childhood ailments and medical problems have vastly increased:

- Childhood obesity rates for children age 6-11 have risen fourfold since 1971;
- Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents has skyrocketed from 2 to 4% of all childhood diabetes before 1992 to 16% by 1994;
- The number of children on prescription medications to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has increased by 100 fold in less than 50 years; and
- Prescriptions for antidepressants for children have doubled in 5 years.

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

– Rachel Carson



Scott Eckert / USFWS

More than fun: nature is good for children (and parents too)!

You probably remember how much fun it was to play outdoors as a child, but you may not have known that it was good for you! Children who play outdoors regularly enjoy better motor skills, physical fitness and general health:

- Children who interact with nature have better cognitive and creative skills than their more housebound counterparts;
- Interaction with the environment can help children deal with stress;

- Children with symptoms of ADHD may have their symptoms and need for medication alleviated through regular outdoor interactions; and
- Children who interact regularly with nature tend to show improved test scores.

Playing in nature is good for the environment too.

A connection with nature, whether it's hiking, fishing, camping, hunting or simply playing outside, helps children develop positive attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. Children's positive interactions with the environment can lead to a life-long interest in enjoying and conserving nature.

As a parent, what can you do?

Society has changed since you were a kid! Computer technology is an integral part of our lives. The Internet, iPods, blackberries, DVDs, Gameboys and Xbox are now part of everyday language. The primary means for kids to spend time outside is during organized team sports. There does not appear to be any "free" time for children to connect with nature. How do we convince kids that its fun to get outside and just play?

Does this sound like you?

"It is too dangerous to let my child go outside alone."

While "stranger danger" is rare and has actually declined over the past two decades, parental fear is a real concern. If "stranger danger" is preventing you from allowing your child to venture into nature, then take a walk with your child! Initially, take small steps, like walking around the block for fifteen minutes. When you're outside, take notice of the fresh air you breathe, the color of the sky, sway of the trees, and critters you see. Over time you will discover open fields, patches of woods, and other neat places to explore in your community. Also look for safe places – such as your backyard – for your child to explore alone.

"There is no green space that is close to us."

If getting to a wildlife refuge or local park is difficult to do on a regular basis, then enjoy other parts of nature right outside your front door. Allow yourself and your child a moment each day to breathe fresh air and marvel at the sky. Or help your child plant and care for a small garden.



"Our tight schedule includes soccer and baseball. Isn't that enough time outside?"

Participating in outdoor organized sports is a wonderful way to get exercise and stay connected to the community. In addition, pediatricians and other childhood experts encourage children to get time outside for unstructured play. Playing outside and exploring natural areas can reduce stress and anxiety, relieve symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and provide the benefits of physical activity.

"I have to force my child to go outside. She prefers to stay inside and watch television or play computer games."

Two decades ago the opposite was true – children couldn't wait to get outside and play. But many children today have been conditioned by media and society to prefer the indoors. Just ask your pediatrician – getting your children outside and away from the television is just as important as getting them to eat their daily intake of fruits and vegetables, brushing their teeth and receiving enough rest.

"I'm not very 'outdoorsy.' How can I take my child outside if I'm not an expert?"

You don't need to be an expert on nature to enjoy it! Nature's health benefits come from experiencing nature, not knowing about the ecological processes at work. You don't have to know the name of every plant or creature to enjoy the outdoors. As Rachel Carson said "It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world."

Endless Possibilities

Whether it is your own backyard, a local community park or a national wildlife refuge, there are lots of outdoor places you and your family can visit. Remember, start by doing something small, and see what happens from there! The possibilities are endless.

References for this information can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/letsgooutside>.



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800/344 WILD
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