

Spending Time in Nature for Your Health — How Outdoor Activities Improve Wellbeing

Many adults enjoy the serenity of spending time in nature as a way to escape the stress and craziness of everyday life. Not only can fresh air and natural scenery have a positive impact on adults, outdoor activities for children can also improve the overall quality of kids' lives.

Dr. Susanne Preston, a Clinical Mental Health Counseling instructor at South University, Virginia Beach says being outside and spending time in nature is good for a person's mental health, as it allows them to de-stress.

"The fresh air and sunlight have the largest benefits," Preston says. "For example, with increased exposure to natural sunlight, incidents of seasonal affective disorder decrease. When individuals are exposed to natural sunlight, the vitamin D in their skin helps to elevate their moods."

"Research has shown that spending time in nature has been associated with decreased levels of mental illness, with the strongest links to reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, in addition to increased self esteem," Preston says.

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"Spending time outdoors is also linked to positive effects on physical health, most notably obesity," she adds.

Preston recommends outdoor activities like taking walks around the park or neighborhood, yoga, and meditation as healthy, relaxing ways to get some fresh air.

Reasons to Spend Time in Nature

The July 2010 edition of the *Harvard Health Letter* lists five good reasons to get outdoors and spend time in nature:

- **Your vitamin D levels rise.** Sunlight hitting the skin begins a process that leads to the creation and activation of vitamin D. Studies suggest that this vitamin helps fight certain conditions, from osteoporosis and cancer to depression and heart attacks. Limited sun exposure (don't overdo it), supplemented with vitamin D pills if necessary, is a good regiment.
- **You'll get more exercise.** If you make getting outside a goal, that should mean less time in front of the television and computer and more time walking and doing other things that put the body in motion.
- **You'll be happier.** Light tends to elevate people's mood, and there's usually more light available outside than in. Physical activity has been shown to help people relax and cheer up, so if being outside replaces inactive pursuits with active ones, it might also mean more smiles.
- **Your concentration will improve.** Children with ADHD seem to focus better after being outdoors. It might be a stretch to say that applies to adults, but if you have trouble concentrating, outdoor activity may help.
- **You may heal faster.** In one study, people recovering from spinal surgery experienced less pain and stress and took fewer pain medications when they were exposed to natural light. An older study showed that the view out the window (trees vs. a brick wall) helped recovery in the hospital.

Benefits of Outdoor Activities for Children

Robyn Bjornson, executive assistant at the Children and Nature Network, says in general, children spend a lot less time outdoors than they used to.

She says this lack of time spent playing outside in the fresh air can be harmful to a child's wellbeing.

"It damages physical and mental health, contributing to nature-deficit disorder, which is the term used to describe the human costs of alienation from nature."

Spending time in natural surroundings stimulates children's creativity.

Bjornson says there are many positive health benefits associated with outdoor activities for children.

"Children who regularly experience nature play are healthier, happier, and test better in school," Bjornson says. "Studies indicate that direct exposure to nature can relieve the symptoms of attention-deficit disorders, improve resistance to stress and depression, increase self-esteem, stimulate cognitive development and creativity, as well as reduce myopia and lower child obesity."

Preston agrees that outdoor activities for children offer countless benefits for kids' overall wellbeing.

"Spending time in natural surroundings stimulates children's creativity," Preston says. "Spending time outdoors also encourages children to actively play, which is good for them, rather than spend time focused on electronic media, television, and video games."

Exploring nature is a great way for a family to spend time together and enjoy some healthy activities, Bjornson says.

"Hiking, walking, beach play, camping, birding, tree climbing, fishing, gardening, sailing, are just a few of the endless ways to enjoy nature," Bjornson says. "And there are more ways in your own backyard or neighborhood."

Though it can be challenging for parents to convince their children that spending time outdoors can be just as much fun as playing video games and watching television, Bjornson says it is important to make outdoor time a priority.

For parents looking for other families interested in outdoor activities for children, Bjornson suggests looking for a local Family Nature Club or downloading a toolkit from the Children and Nature Network to get started.