

Muddy knees and climbing trees: how a summer playing outdoors can help children recharge

4 August 2020, by Avril Rowley



Credit: Pexels

Most adults will remember spending much of their childhood playing outdoors without much parental supervision. But fears for children's safety plus the demands of modern life mean many parents don't allow their children the same freedoms.

We live in an age where people have [distanced themselves from nature](#) in favour of a world full of technology and indoor pursuits. Natural England confirms that only [one in nine](#) children have access to [natural environments](#) throughout their early lives. And a poll from 2016 found 75% of children in the UK spend [less leisure time outdoors than prison inmates](#).

[Research has found this alienation from nature](#) makes children less resilient and less able to cope with the increasing anxieties they have about growing up in the modern world.

And [Public Health England](#) has shown that the communities hardest hit are low income and black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME). Children in these often inner city communities are six times more likely to have no previous experience of activity in outdoor spaces.

The great outdoors

It has long been recognised that humans are drawn to all things alive and natural. And for children, getting outdoors helps to aid their exploration of the world. It's how they learn best—through an environment made up of "[loose parts](#)", which allows for creativity and problem solving. They use their ingenuity to make up games, [construct new imaginary worlds](#) and develop their own solutions to problems.

[Early advocates of outdoor play](#) all recognised the [many positives](#) it can bring. But more recently, outdoor play has been linked to [extended focus](#) on tasks and the ability for children to be [self-directed](#) in their approach to learning.

This is especially significant for children with [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#) as time outdoors can increase concentration and [lower hyperactive symptoms](#).

Health benefits

For all children, spending time outdoors increases exposure to light. This is important because it stimulates the [pineal gland](#), which helps to regulate hormones and is vital to remain healthy.

More exposure to sunlight also increases synchronicity to the natural—or circadian—rhythms of the day. This means that as it gets later in the day, children's brains start to release the [hormone melatonin](#) which [encourages drowsiness](#) in preparation for sleep.

On top of this, exposure to sunlight builds [vitamin D](#) in the body—an important vitamin for maintaining strong bones and preventing chronic diseases.

Active play also allows for more physical and strenuous activities and [increases aerobic exercise](#), so children burn more calories—helping to prevent obesity and strengthen bones and muscles.



There's so much to learn from the great outdoors.
Credit: [Pexels/yogendra singh](#)

get outdoors with your children. Don't underestimate the positive effects of something as simple as a family walk in the park, beach or woodland. Let them jump in puddles and streams, climb trees and gather objects from the wild.

You can also organise games for when you're out and about. [The Matchbox Challenge](#), for example, is a great game for outdoors. Give each child a matchbox and a time limit to find as many natural objects they can and put them in the matchbox. At the end of the [time limit](#) allow them to devise a points system for the different types of objects they found. Add up the points and see who has won.

Another one to try is [journey stick](#), which allows children to create a memento of a walk and the things found. Finding a large stick is the first part of the challenge. Then as your child finds a new item, tie or tape it to the stick. Once at home, your child can retell their journey with the reminders on their journey stick.

Respect for the environment

Children who spend more time in nature also express more appreciation for [conservation of the environment](#) and more [interest in how important animals are](#) for our survival.

Evidence shows that [time spent outdoors as a child](#) is positively linked with higher [environmental literacy](#) and a healthy respect for the world that lasts into adulthood.

Playing outdoors also exposes children to opportunities to extend themselves and push the boundaries of their capabilities. In Norway, for example, from the age of three, children are taught to climb trees, make dens, build fires and use knives when they attend [kindergarten](#)".

This exposure to risk in a controlled environment [increases children's sense of exhilaration](#), which enables them to gain confidence and push themselves onto [more challenging activities](#).

Get your kids outdoors

The summer holidays are the perfect opportunity to

There's also [hug a tree](#) – in pairs children take it in turns to be blindfolded while a parent or sibling takes them to a tree. They use their senses to "get to know" the tree. Their guide returns them to the original spot and they must guess which tree they hugged.

These are just some suggestions, but above all else, allow your [children](#) to explore the environment, get dirty and take risks this summer—they'll thank you for it in the long run.

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