Why do children need nature?

Outdoor activity and access to nature promotes the health, development and well-being of children and youth and forms the foundation for responsible environmental behavior as children grow up.

Outdoor activity and nature play look different as children grow.

However, each development stage presents a window of opportunity during which nature can make a difference in children’s readiness for the next phase and in their ultimate outcomes.

Quick Facts

- Outdoor play improves **physical abilities** and **coordination**.
- Nature play = **creative play**.
- Outdoor play encourages the development of **social skills**.
- Young children who learn outdoors are more **ready for school**.
- Access to nature improves **concentration** and **attention**.
- Nature boosts **achievement**.
- Time in nature **busts stress** and enhances **emotional health**.
- Outdoor activity promotes **fitness** and **health**.
- We protect what we **love**.

Turn the page to learn why nature benefits children of all ages.
Outdoor play improves physical abilities and coordination

Preschool children who play among trees and rocks and who move over uneven ground develop stronger skills in motor coordination, balance and agility than those who play on conventional playgrounds.¹

Outdoor play encourages the development of social skills

Pro-social behaviors and quality of social interactions increase when children spend time in nature.²-³

Nature play = creative play

Young children who play in natural areas, or more naturalized areas of conventional play yards, engage in more varied, elaborate and creative forms of play, including complex make believe, compared to children who play in more barren spaces or on standard playground equipment.²

Young children who learn outdoors are more ready for school

Preschool-aged children who learn outdoors have improved early literacy skills.⁴
Middle and high school students who have access to green spaces in their backyards and schoolyards, and simply more natural views from their bedroom and classroom windows, are better able to concentrate. Children with ADHD display fewer symptoms after a walk in nature or playing outdoors.5-7

Nature boosts achievement
Students achieve at higher levels (e.g. on reading, math and language tests) when they receive instruction that uses the environment as an integrating context for learning. Students who attend high schools with natural landscapes and views of nature perform better on standardized tests, are more likely to graduate, and are more likely to attend college than students whose high school landscape is more barren.8-9

Outdoor activity promotes fitness and health
From increasing physical activity levels for the prevention of obesity, to decreasing asthma symptoms, to easing the symptoms of depression and anxiety, to improving nearsightedness, outdoor activity is good for children’s (and adults’) physical and mental health and well-being.10-16

Time in nature busts stress and enhances emotional health
Children of all ages, and especially children who experience high levels of stress, are more calm and happy and demonstrate more resilience the more they are exposed to green spaces and natural environments.10-11

We protect what we love
Outdoor experiences are critical to developing attitudes and behaviors that protect the environment. People that participate in nature-based outdoor activities as children are more likely to have attitudes favorable toward the environment and engage in behaviors that are protective of the environment.3,17-19


The MN Children and Nature Connection is an alliance of professionals, researchers and parents engaged in a movement to build awareness of the developmental, social, emotional and health benefits of connecting children and families to nature. © 2013 MN Children and Nature Connection.