

Outdoor Play Fact Sheet

Heading outdoors with family and friends is a great opportunity for children (and adults!) to have fun, be active, expand imagination and experience all the joys of the outdoors.



As numerous studies have found, play is an important of healthy child development. Through play, children learn to interact with others, develop language skills, recognize and solve problems, and discover their human potential.¹

However, with the loss of school recess and safe green spaces, increased time in front of television and computer screens and an over-abundance of adult-organized activities, today's children spend less time playing outdoors than ever before.

- Children's free play and discretionary time declined more than 7 hours per week from 1981 to 1997 and an additional 2 hours from 1997 to 2003, totaling more than 9 hours less per week of in which children participate in unstructured activities.²
- More than 60% of children between the ages of 9 and 13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school. Nearly one-fourth get no free-time physical activity at all. ³
- A study in *Pediatrics* reported the average child spends 900 hours in school and nearly 1,023 hours in front of a TV in a given year. ⁴
- During the 1960s, television offered 27 hours of children's programming a week, mostly shown on Saturday morning. Today, there are 14 television networks aimed at children.⁵
- Surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cite a child is six times more likely to play a video game than ride a bike on a typical day. ⁵

Importance of Outdoor Play

Through play, children engage and interact in the world around them. ¹ Children's attempts to make their way across monkey bars, negotiate the hopscotch course, play jacks or toss a football require intricate behaviors of planning, balance and strength-traits we want to encourage in children. ⁶

Outdoor play also builds active, healthy bodies; increasing physical activity levels in children is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidemic.¹

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org) cites the following benefits of outdoor play:

- Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body, and spirit. Until at least the age of nine, children's learning occurs best when the whole self is involved.
- Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn. In play, adults do not interfere and children relax.
- Children express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences through unstructured play.

- Children permitted to play freely with peers develop skills for seeing things through another person's point of view – cooperating, helping, sharing, and solving problems.
- The development of children's perceptual abilities may suffer when so much of their experience is through television, computers, books, worksheets, and media that require only two senses. The senses of smell, touch, and taste, and the sense of motion through space are powerful modes of learning.
- Children who are less restricted in their access to the outdoors gain competence in moving through the larger world. Developmentally, they should gain the ability to navigate their immediate environment (in safety) and lay the foundation for the courage that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives.

References:

¹ Alliance for Childhood. "Time for Play, Every Day: It's Fun – and Fundamental."
http://www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/play_resources.htm

² Clements, R. (2004). "An Investigation of the State of Outdoor Play." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 68-80.

³ US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2003). "Physical Activity Among Children Aged 9 to 13 Years – United States 2002." *MMWR Weekly*, Vol. 52, No. 33, ppg. 785-88.
<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5233a1.htm>

⁴ Sharif, Iman, MD, MPH; and James D. Sargent, MD (2006). "Association Between Television, Movie, and Video Game Exposure and School Performance." *Pediatrics*; Vol. 118, No. 4, pp e1061 - e1070.

⁵ Cauchon, Dennis (2005). "Childhood Pastimes are Increasingly Moving Indoors." *USA Today*, 11 July 2005. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-11-pastimes-childhood_x.htm

⁶ Ginsburg, Kenneth R., MD, MEd; Committee on Communications, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health (2007). "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds." *Pediatrics*; Vol.119, No.1, pp 182-191.