



NJSACC, the Network for New Jersey's
Afterschool Communities

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An In-depth Look at Outdoor Play: Why Children Need Nature

Connecting children and nature leads to more physical activity and less sedentary behavior.

In American Journal of Public Health, researchers found that exposure to natural settings helped reduce the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children.((i)) Similarly, environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan have demonstrated that contact with nature restores attention, and promotes recovery from mental fatigue and the restoration of mental focus.((ii))

Keeping children indoors has negative health consequences.

When children remain distant from nature, their overall health suffers – psychologically, physically and spiritually, according to Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods” and Chairman of the Child and Nature Network. He dubs this phenomenon “nature deficit disorder.” A University of California study shows that most days fewer than three percent of 15-year-olds get a few hours of exercise. Additionally, 20 percent of American children are currently considered obese. ((iii))

Time in nature-based schoolyard settings encourages social and emotional development.

Researchers at a primary-grade schoolyard in Berkeley, California changed part of the asphalt into a meadow with woods, streams, ponds and flowers. More creative play and positive social relationships resulted; proof that social-emotional development is enhanced by natural areas. This evidence is part of the reason many education and conservation groups are making schoolyards into nature-based environments.((iv))

Exposure to nature can enhance certain abilities in children.

“We see increased self-confidence, better body image, and cognitive benefits. Kids who spend more time outdoors tend to do better on testing; they do better on science; they tend to play more cooperatively,” explains author Richard Louv. ((v)) Dr. Stephen R. Kellert of Yale University states, “Play in nature, particularly during the critical period of middle childhood, appears to be an especially important time for developing the capacities for creativity, problem-solving and emotional and intellectual development.” ((vi))

Connections with nature improve classroom outcomes.

According to a study conducted by The American Institutes for Research® on the impact of week-long residential outdoor education programs, exposure to nature benefits children academically. Students who experienced the program (56% of whom reported never spent time in a natural setting) were compared to those who had not. Here were the findings: 27% increase in measured mastery of science concepts; enhanced cooperation and conflict resolution skills; gains in self-esteem, positive environmental behavior and problem-solving, increased motivation to learn and improved classroom behavior. ((vii))

((i))Krisberg, K, The Nation’s Health, The Official Newspaper of the American Public Health Association, October 2007, www.apha.org

((ii)) H. Frumkin, R. Louv, The Powerful Link Between Conserving Land and Preserving Health, The Land Trust Alliance Special Anniversary Report, July 01, 2007.

((iii))ABC7 News Reports on Nature Deficit Disorder, August 18, 2008.

((iv)) Rivkin, M., The Schoolyard Habitat Movement: What it Is and Why Children Need It, Early Childhood Education Journal, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1997, National Wildlife Federation, www.nwf.org

((v))Voiland, A., Why Kids Need a Big Dose of Nature, U.S. News & World Report, February 13, 2008, www.usnews.com

((vi))Kellert, Stephen R., Nature and Childhood Development. In Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2005.

((vii))Effects of Outdoor Education Programs for Children in California. America Institutes for Research: Palo Alto, CA, 2005, the Sierra Club website.

((viii)) Facts Courtesy of The Trust for Public Land
www.tpl.org

Facts Courtesy of Children and Nature Network
www.childrenandnature.org