



Connecting Kids with Nature: The Hidden Benefits of Unstructured Outdoor Play & Exploration

PHYSICAL:

- In neighborhoods without a park or playground, the incidence of **childhood obesity** increases 29%. Children with a park or playground within .5 miles are five times more likely to be a healthy weight than children without playgrounds or parks nearby. *Health Affairs, KaBOOM! 2010. See also "CDC Report Highlights States' Abilities to Support Physical Activity": <http://www.cdc.gov/media/pressrel/2010/r100525.htm>*
- Spending time outside **raises levels of Vitamin D**, helping protect children from future bone problems, heart disease, diabetes and other health issues. *Study: American Academy of Pediatrics. "Many Children have suboptimal Vitamin D Levels," Pediatrics. October 26, 2009.*
- According to several studies in the journal Optometry and Vision Science, researchers found that kids who spent more time outside during the day tended to have **better distance vision** than those who favored indoor activities. Being out there improves distance vision and lowers the chance of nearsightedness.
- Children's **muscle coordination, balance, and ability to assess risk** is so greatly increased that in Berlin, for example, insurance companies enthusiastically support the development of more challenging naturalistic playgrounds, arguing that kids who develop these skills have fewer (costly) accidents as adults. *Information courtesy of Sharon Danks, author of [Asphalt to Ecosystems](#).*

SOCIAL:

- Children who don't experience sufficient unstructured play don't learn **how to work in groups**, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and advocate for themselves. *Study: Weinstein, N., Przybylski, A. K., & Ryan, R. M. (2009). "Can nature make us more caring? Effects of immersion in nature on intrinsic aspirations and generosity." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 35, 1315-1329.*
- Children deprived of unstructured play show increased problems with social integration, and in some cases leading to a **greater likelihood of felony arrests** by young adulthood. *(Health Affairs, KaBOOM! 2010)*

INTELLECTUAL:

- Exposure to natural settings may be **widely effective in reducing ADHD symptoms**. Study: Wells, N.M. (2000). At Home with Nature: Effects of "greenness" on children's cognitive functioning. *Environment and Behavior* (32), 6, pp 775-795. <http://eab.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/6/775>
- Schools with environmental education programs **score higher on standardized tests** in math, reading, writing and listening. Study: Bartosh, Oksana. *Environmental Education: Improving Student Achievement*. Thesis. Evergreen State College, 2003. Web. [http://www.seer.org/pages/research/Bartosh 2003.pdf](http://www.seer.org/pages/research/Bartosh%2003.pdf).
- Exposure to environment-based education significantly increases student performance on tests of their **critical thinking skills**. Study: Ernst, Julie (Athman) and Martha Monroe. "The effects of environment-based education on students' critical thinking skills and disposition toward critical thinking." *10.4 Environmental Education Research*, Nov. 2004.

EMOTIONAL:

- Children's **stress levels fall** within minutes of seeing green spaces. Exposure to natural settings in the course of common after-school and weekend activities may be "widely effective" in reducing attention deficit symptoms in children. "A Potential Natural Treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Evidence From a National Study." Frances E. Kuo, PhD, and Andrea Faber Taylor, PhD. *American Journal of Public Health* 94.9. Sept. 2004.
- Unstructured play **protects children's emotional development** whereas loss of free time and a hurried lifestyle can contribute to anxiety and depression. Study: Ginsburg, MD, MEd, Kenneth R., Committee on Communications, and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds." 119.1 (2007). *American Academy of Pediatrics*, Jan. 2007.
- Recess offers nearly half of chances kids get to be physically active during the school year (42%) but **recess is increasingly absent** from the school day. That absence is more pronounced in schools that serve low-income and high-minority populations. (*Health Affairs, KaBOOM! 2010*)
- Studies have shown that schools without recess face increased incidence in **classroom behavioral problems**, including violence, emotional outbursts, and their students show a lack of ability to interact with peers and authority figures. (*Health Affairs, KaBOOM! 2010*)

For more information on reconnecting kids with nature, including Family Nature Walks:

<http://www.earthskids.com/kidzclub.aspx>

Some information courtesy of the National Wildlife Federation:

<http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Be-Out-There/Why-Be-Out-There/Benefits.aspx>

READ: *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv