



Early Childhood NEWS

Take it Outside!

By Rae Pica

Tony sits focused on his computer screen. Keisha's watching her favorite television program. And Kim is enthusiastically playing video games. What do these three scenarios have in common? They're all taking place indoors – a situation becoming more and more typical in the lives of American children.

There are a number of reasons for this disturbing trend. Among them is lack of time, as preschoolers in our society lead adult-like, highly-scheduled lives and parents themselves have less time to supervise outdoor play or to take their children to the playground.

Safety is another issue in today's world, with many parents reluctant to allow their children the freedom they themselves may have had as children. And, of course, the competition with television, computers, and video games is tremendous. What could the outdoors possibly have to offer that these three sources don't? The answer is a lot!

The Importance of Outdoor Play

The outdoors is the very best place for preschoolers to practice and master emerging physical skills. It is in the outdoors that children can fully and freely experience motor skills like running, leaping, and jumping. It is also the most appropriate area for the practice of ball-handling skills, like throwing, catching, and striking. And children can perform other such manipulative skills as pushing a swing, pulling a wagon, and lifting and carrying movable objects.

Additionally, it is in the outdoors that children are likely to burn the most calories, which helps prevent obesity, a heart disease risk factor that has doubled in the past decade. With studies showing that as many as half of American children are not getting enough exercise-- and that risk factors like hypertension and arteriosclerosis are showing up at age 5-- parents and teachers need to give serious consideration to ways in which to prevent such health problems. The outside is also important because the outdoor light stimulates the pineal gland, the part of the brain that regulates the "biological clock," is vital to the immune system, and makes us feel happier.

Outdoor Play Contributes to Learning

The outdoors has something more to offer than just physical benefits. Cognitive and social/emotional development are impacted, too. Outside, children are more likely to invent games. As they do, they're able to express themselves and learn about the world in their own way. They feel safe and in control, which promotes autonomy, decision-making, and organizational skills. Inventing rules for games (as preschoolers like to do) promotes an understanding of why rules are necessary. Although the children are only playing to have fun, they're learning

- communication skills and vocabulary (as they invent, modify, and enforce rules).
- number relationships (as they keep score and count)
- social customs (as they learn to play together and cooperate).

Learning to Appreciate the Outdoors

We can't underestimate the value of the aesthetic development promoted by being outside. Aesthetic awareness refers to a heightened sensitivity to the beauty around us. Because the natural world is filled with beautiful sights, sounds, and textures, it's the perfect resource for the development of aesthetics in young children.

Preschoolers learn much through their senses. Outside there are many different and wonderful things for them to see (animals, birds, and green leafy plants), to hear (the wind rustling through the leaves, a robin's song), to smell fragrant flowers and the rain-soaked ground, to touch (a fuzzy caterpillar or the bark of a tree), and even to taste (newly fallen snow or a raindrop on the tongue). Children who spend a lot of time acquiring their experiences through television and computers are using only two senses (hearing and sight), which can seriously affect their perceptual abilities.

Finally, what better place than the outdoors for children to be loud and messy and boisterous? Outside they can run and jump and yell, and expend some of the energy that is usually inappropriate – and even annoying – indoors.

Conclusion

When parents and teachers think back to their own childhoods, chances are some of their fondest memories are of outdoor places and activities. Such memories might include a favorite climbing tree or a secret hiding place, learning to turn cartwheels with a friend, or playing tag with the family dog. Maybe there was the smell of lilacs, the feel of the sun on the first day warm enough to go without a jacket, or the taste of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a blanket spread on the grass. Children usually share the values of the important adults in their lives. When we show an appreciation for the great outdoors, the children in our lives will follow our lead.

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Activities for the Great Outdoors

- A nature walk is a great way to enhance children's appreciation of the natural environment. Ask them to tell you what they're seeing, hearing, and smelling. Encourage them to touch – to discover the smoothness of a rock, the roughness of bark, and the fragility of a dried leaf. For young children, these are science experiences.
- Set up an obstacle course with old tires, large appliance boxes, and tree stumps. Moving through it will teach important concepts like over, under, through, and around.
- A "listening" walk makes for a wonderful sound discrimination activity. As you walk with the children, point out the sounds of birds, passing cars, whistling wind, even your footsteps on the sidewalk. What sounds can the children identify on their own? Which are loud and which are soft? Which are high and which are low? What are their favorite sounds? Bring along a tape recorder so the children can try to identify the sounds at a later time!
- Bring the parachute or an old sheet outside and play parachute games (shaking it, circling with it, making waves with it, or bouncing foam balls on it).
- Bring a portable boom box outdoors and let the children experience the joy of dancing in a natural environment!
- Try "water painting," in which children paint the side of a building with a brush and a bucket of water. It exercises arms and upper torso while also teaching about wet and dry, light and dark, and evaporation.
- Chasing bubbles gives children a chance to run!

Resources

Hug a Tree and Other Things to Do Outdoors with Young Children by Robert Rockwell, Robert Williams, and Elizabeth Sherwood. Gryphon House, 1983.

Sharing Nature with Children by Joseph Bharat Cornell. Ananda Press, 1982.

The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside by M.S. Rivkin. NAEYC, 1995.

The Outrageous Outdoor Games Book by Bob Gregson, Fearon, 1984.

The Outside Play and Learning Book by Karen Miller. Gryphon House, 1989.



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