



Active Outdoor Play

Studies show that regular physical activity helps children be fit and healthy, improves self-esteem and decreases the risk of serious illnesses such as heart disease and stroke later in life. Active outdoor play enhances children's senses of smell, touch and taste, and the sense of motion through space, which are powerful ways of learning. Children's perceptual abilities may suffer when they experience the world mainly through television, computers and books. Their social abilities to cooperate, help, share and solve problems with other children are fostered when playing together outdoors. And when they have access to the outdoors, they gain the ability to navigate their immediate environment safely, and lay the foundation for the courage that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives.

Ideas for active play

Infants count on you to set up a safe space away from more mobile children where they can explore with their senses, practice using their muscles and move freely. A large blanket on the floor with some colorful toys or objects of different sizes, shapes and textures will keep them active and interested. Try to take infants outdoors each day, even for a short walk in the yard.

Toddlers explore and learn about the world through unstructured play time. Running, climbing and playing in a sandbox are all fun and offer opportunities to develop and practice new skills. You can lead movement activities such as jumping with two feet, skipping and running. Explore the crunchy leaves, bare tree limbs and what can float in puddles.

Preschool-age children can enjoy simple games, such as Simon Says. They can roll large balls, play catch and ride wheel toys, dance, sing or move to music. Unstructured time allows them to learn important skills, use their imaginations, and offers time to wind down. Gardening or simple science activities can encourage their enjoyment of the outdoors while using all their senses.

School-age children are ready for new learning experiences and both team and individual sports. Children who prefer not to participate in organized teams need regular exercise, such as running, walking, skating, bicycling, dance and nonviolent martial arts.

Children with chronic health conditions and disabilities should be included in outdoor play activities; they receive the same positive benefits from exercise and exploration. Some activities may need to be modified or adapted.

Outdoor play in winter

Winter brings many wonderful opportunities for children to delight in seasonal changes while playing outdoors. But all too often cold or rainy days mean that many young children spend their day indoors engaged in quiet activities. Keep the following in mind:

- Playing outdoors in cold weather doesn't cause colds—germs do. Playing outdoors will reduce the amount of time children and adults are exposed to germs while cooped up inside.
- Dress in layers and keep extra dry clothing for children who get wet or muddy.
- Open a window and let in the fresh air periodically. Overheated rooms with stale, dry air can be a health hazard. Change your furnace and air filters regularly and watch for mold.
- Use sunscreen to prevent sunburn and decrease the risk of developing skin cancer at a later age whenever your child is playing outdoors. Unless it's actually raining, sun damage can occur whether it's sunny or cloudy.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all trampolines be avoided due to the high number of injuries at all ages.
- Prevent slips and falls by wiping down wet outdoor equipment. Check for adequate cushioning under climbing equipment, as sand and bark may compact when wet.
- Never let toddlers play around water without constant supervision. It takes very little time and only a few inches of water for a puddle to become a drowning hazard.

And remember—have fun outdoors with your children. Even when the weather is less than perfect, it's good for you too!

Resources

Is It Safe to Play Outdoors in Winter? Health and Safety Notes, CCHP (2001).

What Can I Teach My Young Child About the Environment? Ruth Wilson. <http://npin.org/library/1998/n00025/n00025.html>.

The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside. Mary S. Rivkin. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995).

The Value of School Recess and Outdoor Play. Early Years Are Learning Years, National Association for the Education of Young Children (1997). <http://npin.org/library/1998/n00057/n00057.html>.

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