

GET OUTSIDE, THE WEATHER IS FINE

The average child in the United States spends less than 10 minutes a day in unstructured play outdoors, while spending many hours a day in front of a screen and in structured activities. We are fortunate to live in a beautiful area without severe weather extremes. It is also a generally safe place to live. We should all be getting outside as much as possible, ideally much more than 10 minutes every day.

Infants, toddlers, and children love to be outdoors. They enjoy the sunlight, sky, sights, smells and sounds that are not available indoors. Sensory experiences like feeling the breeze on their faces, falling rain, and the texture of grass and sand are wonderful. There are countless benefits of spending time outdoors.

First, free unstructured play outside supports children's overall development. Focus is improved. Curiosity is enhanced. It stimulates creativity and imagination by challenging kids to come up with their own activities and make choices. It fosters responsibility. Playing outdoors increases confidence and self-esteem. Solving problems outside improves language, math, reasoning and observational skills.

Second, there is strong evidence that going outside benefits overall physical health. When outside, children are more likely to play actively, using their whole bodies, strengthening their hearts, lungs, and muscles. Movement improves physical fitness, an important defense against the present epidemic of childhood overweight and obesity. Sleep is improved because sunlight contributes to a normal circadian rhythm and the brain's production of our own melatonin. Being outdoors reduces the incidence of myopia (nearsightedness), which has been rising rapidly in children as they have been spending so much time indoors looking at TV, tablet, phone, and computer screens. We all absorb Vitamin D from sunlight. Vitamin D is very important for the health of bones and teeth, the immune system, and many other body functions. The normal microorganisms that exist outdoors also stimulate the immune system and help prevent allergies. Dirt is your child's friend.

Third, mental health is positively affected by being outdoors and being in nature. Spending time outside decreases stress, anxiety, depression, anger, and aggression. Those effects are from both experiencing all that is

offered in the outside world, and also by escaping the the overstimulation of flashing screens, vibrating phones, social media, etc. Social interactions, which are great for mental health, are safer outdoors.

Fourth, spending time outside helps foster a love of nature that will hopefully lead to children and adults who will care for the environment and our planet.

Be safe when outdoors. Please use sunscreen, hats and sunglasses. Insect repellants should also be used appropriately. Lyme Disease cannot be transmitted unless a tick has been attached for at least 24-36 hours, so check your child and yourself for ticks at the end of every day. Stay well hydrated. Be careful at the beach and around pools. Beware of hot grills and fire pits.

So, please get outside with your kids. Start when they are infants. Go play in the backyard. Throw or kick a ball. Picnic. Visit local parks and playgrounds. Delaware has wonderful state parks and beaches. Walk in the woods. Go camping. Meet friends for a group adventure. Garden together. Have story time outside. Have scavenger hunts. The possibilities are endless. The benefits are enormous and life-changing.