

Benefits of Nature & Outdoor Education in Early Childhood

Parks, backyards, windowsills, sidewalk cracks and even empty lots are all part of nature. Different outdoor spaces, no matter how small, can broaden a child's perspective about the world around them and instill them with a sense of natural wonder and curiosity that will last a lifetime.

Physical Development



New Discoveries & Sensory Experiences: With early learners, everything is a new discovery! The natural world is full of rich sensory experiences and new places to explore. Time spent outside allows children to be present through their senses and more mindful of their surroundings.

Health & Wellness: Spending time outside nurtures gross and fine motor skill development with endless opportunities for movement, balance and coordination. Nature also offers various mental health benefits such as enhanced mindfulness, reduced stress and increased feelings of groundedness. By participating in activities like gardening, adults can help children develop healthy lifestyles that last far beyond early childhood.



Cognitive Development

Critical Thinking: Learning about the natural world strengthens observation skills and reinforces critical thinking. Children experience how learning transcends classrooms and is an ongoing, dynamic process.



Social-Emotional Learning

Risk-Taking: Outdoor learning allows young children to develop a sense of personal limits at an early age. Small cuts and bruises and getting dirty will help them test and establish their own boundaries for play and help them develop skills for healthy risk assessment.

Independence & Self-Efficacy: Young children build self-confidence and a healthy sense of accomplishment as they explore natural environments. Acquiring new skills and abilities helps them learn they *can* do different things!

Empathy: Nature and the environment help children learn to care for something other than themselves. They develop a natural appreciation and respect for animals, plants, community spaces and ecosystems.



Try This!

- When a child finds something new, **ask what they would name it** if they were the first to discover it.
- Take a nature walk and **focus on the senses**, or eliminate one sense to focus on the others.
- Have children **describe what they notice** about different things they find, or take a photograph of an unfamiliar plant, flower or tree to identify together at a later time.
- Go on an outdoor scavenger hunt or look for changes in trees, plants, animals and weather to **mark the seasons**. Collect colorful leaves in autumn, observe snowflakes and look for animal tracks in the winter, look at flower buds in the spring and enjoy the bounty of a garden in the summer.
- Watch the clouds, smell flowers, or listen to the sound of wind or running water. Allow children to take their time to **explore things at their own pace**.
- **Pot a plant together** or grow herbs on a windowsill from a seed. Watch and **make observations** with your child as you track its growth.
- If you cannot go outside, **bring the outside in**: watch birds from a window, observe how trees move in the wind, care for a house plant, or use natural materials like leaves, twigs, small stones or flowers for a nature collage.

Resources:

Alice Sterling Honig, *Experiencing Nature with Young Children: Awakening Delight, Curiosity, and a Sense of Stewardship*. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2014.

Children and Nature Network: <https://www.childrenandnature.org/>

Council for Learning Outside of the Classroom:

<https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Benefits-for-Early-Years-LOtC-Final-5AUG09.pdf>

Early Sprouts Institute (Early Education): <http://www.earlysprouts.org/>

Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*

Richard Louv, *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life*