

Outside: The Happiest Place for Exercising

Tip – Outside play makes for happier, healthier, and more cooperative children.

Close your eyes and bring up an idyllic childhood memory. When we at Parenting Press did this, we remembered playing “fort” with neighborhood pals among some low-hanging tree branches. Chances are, you also remembered yourself playing outdoors. Outside play is far more important to children’s health and development than many of us realize, and unfortunately, it is slowly shrinking in our society. There are many reasons, chief among them are:

- **Lack of time.** Movement specialist Rae Pica writes that children “in our society lead adult-like, highly-scheduled lives.” She adds that parents themselves rarely have time in their day to supervise outside play or to take their children to a playground.
- **Screen time.** The ever-increasing amount of time children spend on screens (such as computer/gaming /TV/texting) keeps them indoors.
- **Concerns about safety.** Parents are reluctant in today’s world to allow their children the same freedom they enjoyed themselves as children.



But why is outside play so important? There are numerous benefits – one of the most obvious is the opportunity to exercise.

Developing bodies have a real need to run, jump, leap, and skip. Pediatric nurse Helen Neville, author of *Is This a Phase?*, points out that aggressive play in young boys is due to the greater amount of muscle they typically carry.

“Like other male mammals, boys have a strong biological need to exercise and tone their muscles by running, bumping, hitting, pushing, shoving, and throwing. For this reason, they may be in more conflict with the environment [than girls].”



She recommends hours of exercise each day, as much of it as possible outside. Yards, fields, forests, playgrounds – all of these outside environments can stand up to vigorous physical play.

“The more we can find safe ways for both boys and girls to exercise all their muscles, the less conflict there will be,” comments Neville.

The great outdoors is the most appropriate place for practicing ball-handling skills like throwing, catching, and striking. The same goes for other manipulative skills like pulling a wagon, pushing a swing, or digging holes in the dirt or sand.



Also obvious is the benefit of exercise to healthy weight management. The National Institute of Health puts an “at risk” marker at age nine. Before their ninth birthday, children generally get three hours of exercise a day; after age nine, it shrinks to well under an hour. This has serious consequences to our childhood obesity rate.

Another physical benefit to outside play is the exposure to sunlight, which stimulates the pineal gland – vital to the immune system. It also stimulates a feeling of happiness or well-being. People just feel better when they get outside regularly. It’s good for us. Children who get frequent outside play time sleep better, eat better, and are generally more cooperative inside the home.