



There has been increasing talk about the advantages to productivity of taking a walk around the block during lunch hour. We feel the tension melt away when we arrive at the country for a weekend, or even when we take a stroll in the park. Being surrounded by green seems to be soothing for most people. Seeing the sky and taking in sunshine, even in predominantly concrete surroundings, wards off [depression](#).

What is so important for adults is even more critical for young children whose bodies are developing, whose habits are forming, whose self-regulating abilities are new and unreliable, and whose understanding of the physical world is minimal and growing as fast as the child's experience allows.

## Why Kids Need To Play Outside

Some of the reasons young children need to play outdoors every day are obvious. We are all aware of the [obesity epidemic](#) in our country. Children need to move in order to burn calories. At least as importantly, they need to find joy in moving so that it can become a lifelong habit that will protect their health in the long term. Organized games in a noisy gymnasium can teach children valuable skills, but they are no replacement for getting to know and enjoy what one's own body can do, in natural surroundings.

I know adults who grew up wandering the woods around rural homes, and now turn to exercise when they feel stress. Of course, there are many other factors in a person's choice of stress-management strategy, and a life outdoors is not insurance. But most of us would like to do whatever we can to increase the chances that our children will head outdoors for a run when they feel overwhelmed rather than to the misuse of food and other substances, unhealthy relationships, and so on.

Outdoor play, in many anecdotal reports, helps [children with ADD and ADHD](#). Focused physical activity of the sort active children devise for themselves is helpful for attention difficulties. Some degree of what we now consider attention disorders used to be absorbed by the regular routines of children's lives. Even fifty years ago, many children walked to and from school and spent hours outdoors every day, whether climbing rocks in the woods, riding bikes on suburban streets, or playing hopscotch on city sidewalks. Fifty years before that, when a large percentage of American children lived on farms, focused physical activity was not only permissible, but required. Children did chores that required large motor exertion, and provided practice with [executive function](#) (the ability to organize tasks effectively) in a concrete context. The less time children spend in focused physical activity, the more problematic attention issues seem to become.

# The Lessons Kids Learn from Outdoor Play

The [cognitive benefits of outdoor play](#) are tremendous, though they may not be obvious at first glance. In outdoor play, children practice planning and executing ideas. They experience making a guess about something and then trying it out —

With enough of this kind of experience, children acquire an intuitive understanding of scientific method. Later, when it is taught formally inside the classroom, children who have had the experiences have a great head start in understanding what the teacher is talking about.

In outdoor play, children learn, through repetitive practice that they would never be induced to undertake in a classroom exercise, various attributes of solids and liquids.

areas. But the best STEM education for our youngest children is lots of hands on, full body, exploratory experience (aka play) in the real, physical world.