

# KIDS AT PLAY: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYING OUTSIDE

Welcome back to the Digital Detox series! In the first article

(<https://www.thewellnessway.com/digital-detox-kickoff-summer-series/>), we covered what happens when kids spend more time online and less time outside. The second article

(<https://www.thewellnessway.com/from-artificial-blue-light-to-sunlight/>) went into the dangers of artificial blue light and the benefits of natural sunlight. The third article

(<https://www.thewellnessway.com/mario-mayhem-empowering-the-superhero-within/>) discussed five dangers of video games with a list of healthy alternatives. In this final article, we will talk about why kids need to play outside! It turns out that spending active time outdoors is essential for kids' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

## KIDS ARE SPENDING ALL DAY INSIDE

In today's culture, kids are spending more time inside than ever before. The technology we now have access to makes it possible for kids to go almost the entire day without ever stepping a foot outside.

Picture this scenario:

- Kids get up in the morning at their house
- They go into the attached garage to get into a car (or might run out to the bus)
- Then it's time to ride in the car or bus to school (where they might spend time on the iPad on the way)
- They get dropped off at school, and spend all day inside (maybe there's recess)
- Parents or the bus picks them up at the door
- They go back home, where they are on the computer, iPad, or watching TV until bed.
- REPEAT

According to a [survey of 5,000 elementary school parents \(https://nypost.com/2022/06/14/parents-worried-kids-dont-spend-enough-time-outdoors-poll/\)](https://nypost.com/2022/06/14/parents-worried-kids-dont-spend-enough-time-outdoors-poll/), kids today are spending about five hours a week outside. That's less than an hour a day in the fresh air and sunshine. Unless parents are intentional about time outside, kids can go all week only spending a few minutes outside.

## DANGERS OF SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME INSIDE

We talked about some of the dangers of spending too much time inside in [the first article \(https://www.thewellnessway.com/digital-detox-kickoff-summer-series/\)](https://www.thewellnessway.com/digital-detox-kickoff-summer-series/) in this series. Too much time inside tends to lead to increased screen time, less physical activity, less sun exposure,

It's partially about the time spent on screens, but it's also about what kids are missing out on; all the things kids have traditionally done for generations. Remember these? Exploring nature, catching frogs, building forts, and climbing trees.

Nature was the playground. It was also the classroom. Spending too much time inside means kids are not getting these opportunities for growth and development. After all, play is a child's work. It's important for normal brain development and personal development, preparing them for problem-solving, teamwork, resilience, and commitment to their goals.

## THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING OUTSIDE

Playing outside is vitally important for the health of growing kids. It benefits every system of the body, making them healthier and more resilient adults. The following are just a few of the benefits for the nervous, musculoskeletal, immune, and cardiovascular systems, not to mention their emotional wellbeing.

### BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Believe it or not, playing outside is needed for healthy brain development. Animal [studies have shown \(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/14199261/\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/14199261/) that exposure to stimulating environments leads to larger, more intelligent brains compared to boring, more confining environments. Interacting with nature may also [improve memory \(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22464936/\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22464936/) and lessen a child's chances of developing [mental illness \(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30804178/\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30804178/) later in life.

Spending more time outside can also **improve attentiveness**

(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18725656/>) –even in children with ADHD.

## CARDIOVASCULAR FITNESS

When kids get outside, they have a natural tendency to run. You don't have to tell them to get their heart rate up. They do it automatically. Babies get cardiovascular exercise by crying, but kids need to run! They need to get out of breath, fall on the ground, and bounce up again, laughing. It's a full cardio workout –exactly what they need to get their heart pumping, and blood circulating with all its healing nutrients.

## MUSCLE DEVELOPMENT

When kids are allowed to run, jump, skip, tumble, and dodge other kids trying to tag them, they are using all their muscles. This exercise is vital for healthy muscle development as kids grow and change. When kids are allowed to spend time inside, they are more likely to be told not to do these things – “Don't run.” “Don't jump on the bed.” “Don't throw things...” etc. When they are outside –especially in plenty of open space — they have the freedom to do all those things.

## DIRT FOR THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Outdoor play means exposure to dirt and all the creepy crawlies that live outside –bacteria, viruses, insects, spiders, rodents, and more. These aren't to be feared like we've been taught! With all this exposure to germs comes a robust immune system. **Science supports this** (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3437652/>). A study published in the journal *Science* found that exposure to microbes during childhood helped create a balanced immune response. Animal models of both Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) and allergic asthma showed protection from early exposure to microbes.

## SUNSHINE

Just like plants, **kids need sunshine** (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2290997/>). It's essential for vitamin D production, which is required for bone development. Without adequate vitamin D, children can develop a condition called rickets, with weak bones, poor growth, bone deformities, and dental problems. Vitamin D can also help with mood support, eye health, and a

strong immune system. Yes, sunshine can be overdone, leading to sunburns. If you're looking for a natural sunscreen, we've got you covered (<https://www.thewellnessway.com/the-wellness-way-guide-to-choosing-a-sunscreen/>).

## GROUNDING

When kids spend time outside (especially when barefoot), they are also connecting to the earth's electromagnetic field. Research has shown that “[grounding](https://www.thewellnessway.com/grounding-soles-4-benefits-of-earthing/) (<https://www.thewellnessway.com/grounding-soles-4-benefits-of-earthing/>)” does all kinds of [great things for kids' health](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3265077/) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3265077/>), setting them up for better health as adults. It lowers inflammation levels, improves sleep, lowers stress levels, and improves cardiovascular health.

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF OUTDOOR PLAY

To get the most out of the outdoors, it's important to realize that it's more about getting back to nature. That doesn't mean manicured lawns, cement sidewalks, flat, even ground, and plastic playgrounds with soft, ground-up tires to fall onto. It means getting back to the woods, fields, and mountains – with all their imperfections. When our surroundings are perfect and predictable, it doesn't require kids to strategize or make quick decisions.

Take the opportunity to get the kids out of the backyard and explore nature. Here are a few ideas for getting the most out of outdoor playtime:

- Look for new county and state parks to visit.
- Check out a local botanical garden.
- Find a farm to visit! Many farms offer tours and opportunities for kids to interact with animals.
- Start a garden. Kids love having their own plot to watch grow.
- Involve kids in outdoor chores — even if it's weeding the garden, picking rocks out of the grass, raking leaves, or shoveling snow with a plastic shovel. Have a contest to see who can find the most rocks or make the biggest pile of leaves.
- Work with the kids to build a backyard treehouse or give them materials to make a fort.

- Don't sweat it if they start making mud pies. Go to your local thrift store to find the perfect pie plate!

Kids need these natural elements in their lives. There's even a new trend to create natural playgrounds. This play equipment is patterned after the natural play that a child would engage in while spending time in the great outdoors. It uses natural materials to make what look like miniature natural landscapes.

## TAKE CARE OF THEIR HEALTH NATURALLY, THE WELLNESS WAY

The main message behind this article is to be intentional about getting your kids outside. Outdoor play is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle in children, but it's not the only thing to monitor. Kids can also have other imbalances due to the more stressful and toxic world we live in today. Have you had your kids' food allergies tested? How is their gut health? Immune response? We don't guess; we test. Make an appointment with a Wellness Way doc to make sure your kids stay healthy through all their growth and changes.