

Good why children need to spend time in outdoor environments literature review ex...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Obesity](#)



Denying children a chance to interact with nature in the smallest magnitude robs the true beauty of life. Outdoor environment is not only a place to burn calories, but it is also a platform in which children can foster the learning skills. According to Miller 1989 and Burdette and Whitaker (2004), it is accepted that freely chosen outdoor games and activities help children learn life skills such as social competence, creative thinking, problem-solving and safety skills necessary for adult life. Burdette and Whitaker (2005), emphasizes that if children have regular opportunities to mingle with nature, they will be smarter, healthier, happier. Additionally, research shows that spending time outside has many health benefits since the exposure to fresh air, natural elements such as trees, grass and sunlight has many health benefits. In the book, *The Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv says that the today's families have little chances to connect with nature and resulted to intake of processed food that are rich in calorie. So feeding habits have increased the rate of obesity in children which can result to serious effects such as heart disease, sleep apnoea, diabetes and psychological and social problems.

Louv (2005) believes that the society through institutions such as schools, families and organizations that are legalised to preserve nature. Another hindrance to interaction with nature is the urban association of nature with doom instead of solitude and joy as it was in the traditional setting. However, the major reasons given by parents and children for the lack of these natural interactions are inadequate safety in the woods, too much school work and homework and/ or completion from computers and television. As a result of indoor activities, Louv concludes that children's worlds are limited to

cyberspace. Other nature related advantages documented by researchers include; enhanced body image and positive behaviour changes for children with disabilities, reduction in Attention-Deficit Disorder symptoms and therapeutic value for youth diagnosed with mental health problems.

According to a California based state education and environmental roundtable, studies on environmental based education found that use of an outdoor classroom helped students perform better in various subjects and enhance their critical thinking, decision making and problem solving skills. Other findings prove that out-door activities stimulate creativity and language development in children. According to Burdette and Whitaker (2005), available research shows a strong relation between children's education performance and out-door activities. Studies in the United States of America by National Centre for Health Statistics (2006) support the California research by establishing that outdoor classroom and related nature-based education programs improve social studies, maths, language art, and science by 27%. O'Brien (2006) documents that learning in natural environments such as Forest School and Outdoor Nursery schools have educational benefits as well as added value of increased physical activities. Studies on children in schoolyards reports that when children are in the green natural areas, they engage in more creative playing activities than in other areas of play. According to Burdette and Whitaker (2005), playing in a natural environment is useful in enhancing creative capacities, intellectual development and problem-solving skills. Burdette and Whitaker (2004) state that nearness to, communication with and everyday exposure to the natural environment enhances children's cognitive abilities.

National Centre for Health Statistics (2006), child obesity has risen to affect 17% that may usher in another health complication. The risen in obesity cases is summarised as 'Nature-Deficit Disorder' as coined by Louv. According to Hunt et al. (2000), the environment has a complex and difficult health impact to unravel. However, in an environmental context, health must be considered as a complex and universal phenomenon. Burdette and Whitaker (2004), states that there is a possibility of finding healing powers in the natural environment either in the medical plants, fresh air and pure water or the beautiful scenery. Outdoor environment provides scope for relaxation, refreshments and a better way to deal with stress. Though there is no strong evidence linking health and physical activities, research has shown that students who spend time in outdoor activities are more active. When these activities are integrated with paediatric care, outdoor activities and interaction with nature improves mental health and physical well-being. The United States department of health and human services emphasizes on physical activity as it helps in building and maintaining healthy bones and muscles as well as reducing the risks of obesity and chronic disease. Researches have shown that physical activities reduce systolic and diastolic blood pressure in young children. Other findings say that these activities help in the treatment of type II diabetes. The health hazard in children is as a result of electronic media where children in America spend approximately three hours watching television. National Centre for Health Statistics (2006) looks at physical activities in relation to health and well-being pay closer attention to children. In their finding, they propose two conceptual pathways which are healthy and unhealthy. The healthy pathway takes a direction that

people are active, engage with nature and eat healthy food; therefore, they have a better life and live long. Unhealthy path, on the other hand, is characterised by inactiveness, not nature interaction and unhealthy food leading to earlier deaths and poor quality of life. Hand Hunt et al. (2000) on the other hand, relates natural environment to reduction of stress and other health issues such as obesity in children.

According to Hunt et al. (2000), exercising in the natural environment is associated with mental and spiritual health. These exercise increase one's ability to function better in other activities. There are several ways of interventions for tackling mental ill health, but nature based interventions are considered the most appropriate and cost effective. It implies that outdoor activities and exposure to nature has a positive impact on someone's mental health. Worldwide research shows that there is a significant benefit to individual mental health in different situations. Children who actively interact with nature have improved moods, boosted psychological health, as well as better attention and concentration. As a result of these benefits, the child is capable of paying attention in class and performs better academically. Doing physical activities in the natural environment, 'green exercise,' has therapeutic benefits called green care. Natural environment has many benefits that are not only social and economical, but also extend to cover health issues. Practicing in the natural environment helps the body fight many chronic diseases which are caused by obesity. With the increasing indoor activities due to the popularity of television, computers and other indoor games, it is important for parents to educate their children on the importance of interacting with nature. Such

information would be useful in helping them develop their skills, knowledge, health as well as improving the cognition abilities through learning skills that improve their creativity and problem solving skills.

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