

# Go Outside and Play!

by Jennifer Kroll



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*Spending time outside can be a real kick for your health.*

Think about how much time you spent outside last week. Really "outside." Walking from the car into the mall doesn't count. Now think about how much time you spent indoors-on the Internet or playing video games or watching TV.

"I play inside more than outside," says Casey M., of South Bend, Indiana. "I like to play games on the computer."

If you're like Casey and many other people, it's likely that you spent more time inside four walls than outside in fresh air. Kids spent two fewer hours per week on sports and outdoor activities in the early 2000s than kids did in the early 1980s. That's

according to a University of Michigan study. *Sedentary* (nonmoving) activities are more popular. Most people in the study reported spending most of their free time watching TV (85 percent) or playing computer games (81 percent). The costs "include obesity, greater stress, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses-and less joy in being alive and aware," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.

## Find Your Place

Are you staying inside because you need a place to go? Former open spaces have been filled in with buildings. All kinds of areas are off-limits to tweens and teens. "It wasn't that long ago that kids were free to roam sidewalks, streets, alleys, vacant lots, city parks," says Rhonda Clements. She's a professor of physical education at Manhattanville College in New York. "Students still need to have that place where they are free to go and meet friends."

Even when space is available, personal safety is an issue. "I wish I could play outside more," says Angela P., of New Haven, Connecticut. "I live in an apartment. There's a park down the

street, but my mom doesn't think it's safe to go there by ourselves."

Rae Pica, an activity specialist, says she knows that "many kids are home alone in the afternoons and have been [told] not to leave the house."

So what's a person to do? One answer is to make sure an adult knows how to find you. A cell phone can help. Another idea is to get an adult involved. "Rely on your neighborhood and maybe on one or two parents to get to a local park where there is ample space," says Clements. Most communities have organized activities and supervised recreation spaces that offer parents peace of mind.

## The Great Outdoors

There's no doubt about it-heading outdoors is good for you. So what can you do out there?

- **Explore.** Take a friend along, and check out your environment on foot. Just make sure a responsible adult knows where you are.
- **Get on wheels.** Cycling, in-line skating, and skateboarding are fun ways of enjoying the fresh air. Be sure to strap on safety gear when you get on wheels.
- **Be artistic.** Grab a camera, and take photos outside. Or use sidewalk chalk to create colorful works of art. Pick up sticks to create boxes, sculptures, and frames.
- **Spy on wildlife.** What lives nearby? Search for signs of your many-legged or winged neighbors.
- **Recapture your childhood.** Remember what it was like to climb around on a jungle gym or swing or play Four Square? Why should little kids have all the fun? Revisit games you enjoyed as a little kid-playing games is a great way to relieve stress!
- **Play with toys.** You might find that your Frisbee-throwing, kite-flying, and Hacky Sack-kicking skills improve as you get older and more coordinated.
- **Join the club.** If you are with a group of people, "your parents won't worry as much about safety," says author Richard Louv. You're also likely to make new friends. Possibilities might include a Scout organization, YMCA, 4-H, or sports club or team. Many communities offer outdoor programs too.
- **Just hang out.** Chat with friends, kick around a ball, whatever you feel like doing-hey, it's your outdoors!

# Why Play? Why Outside?

"I do soccer, so I'm outside a lot," says Jacob C. of Nashua, New Hampshire. "Sometimes, though, I wish I had more time to *play* outside."

Playing is important, even for adults. Goofing around relieves stress and lets us feel free and creative. And playing outside is especially good. Just being exposed to the great outdoors does wonders. "Outside light is ... vital to the immune system and simply makes us feel happier," Pica says.

Here are four great reasons to get outside and play.

**1. Outdoor activity expands your senses.** Try this: If you have a computer, the next time you sit down to use it, take note of your senses during and after your session. Then take note of your senses after you've done something outside. Which makes you feel better?

Being outdoors brings the senses to life. In fact, 75 percent of students polled by Weekly Reader said they felt better after spending time outside. "Hiking, exploring, and fishing help hone all of your senses," says Betsy Keller. She's a professor of exercise and sports sciences at Ithaca College in New York. "Smell, sight ... [they're] all engaged when you're outside."

Bonus! With your senses engaged, you'll feel free and more creative. Clements reports that in a park near her home, young people turned a concrete slab into their own outdoor theater.

**2. Playing outside helps your body.** Want to get fit? Go outside! "The outdoors is the best place for [you] to practice and master physical skills and to experience the pure joy of movement," says Pica.

You've probably heard teachers and others tell you that getting 30 minutes of exercise a day or walking 10,000 steps helps you stay fit. "We've emphasized physical activity levels and not focused on the fun aspect," Keller admits. But if you're having fun, you're more likely to stick with it, and being outside offers special fun and fitness. When playing outside, says Keller, "the terrain varies. You can be on stairs, hills, walls, play equipment. It challenges your balance, coordination, and stamina. Playing on a flat floor doesn't always do that."

Time spent outdoors pays off later too. It helps keep your body's clock on track so that you sleep better at night and feel less sleepy during the day.

**3. Outdoor play eases your mind.** Are you stressed out? Having trouble concentrating? Too much time indoors-away from the natural world-may be a cause. Louv uses a term to

describe the set of problems caused by too much time indoors: *nature-deficit disorder*. "I use it not as a medical diagnosis," he says. "I use it to describe the price we pay for being so separated from nature."

Exposure to nature has been shown to lower stress levels and ease symptoms of attention deficit disorder. "By comparison," says Louv, "activities indoors, such as watching TV, or activities in paved, non-green areas leave kids [with ADD symptoms] worse off."

**4. Spending time outdoors brings you closer to the environment.** Hearing the leaves crackle underfoot and breathing in fresh air build awareness and appreciation of the environment. If you walk through the woods in search of cool birds and plants, you may find your mind expanding.

No woods nearby? You don't need a huge park to enjoy nature's benefits. Nature can be as close as your own backyard or that clump of trees at the end of the street. There are bits of nature everywhere-even in cities. "Some naturalists call that 'nearby nature,'" Louv says. "It's a great way to experience a piece of the natural world without wandering too far from home."

So the next time you sit down to spend quality time with a TV, consider treating yourself to a little outdoor play instead. It's not called the great outdoors for nothing.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. According to a University of Michigan study, how much time did kids in the early 2000s spend on sports and outdoor activities?

- A. two fewer hours than kids in the early 1980s
- B. 85 percent more time than kids in the early 1980s
- C. 81 percent more time than kids in the early 1980s
- D. 30 fewer minutes than kids in the early 1980s

2. What is the author trying to persuade the reader to do?

- A. to play video games more often
- B. to be more physically active outdoors
- C. to move from urban to rural areas
- D. to avoid the dangers of playing outside by staying inside

3. Read "The Great Outdoors" section.

What can you conclude about getting exercise outside based on the suggestions in this section?

- A. There are only a few different activities that you can do outdoors.
- B. There are many different activities that you can do outdoors.
- C. The best and most effective activity to do outside is to walk.
- D. Even driving around in a car counts as getting outside.

**4. Read these sentences from the text.**

"I do soccer, so I'm outside a lot," says Jacob C. of Nashua, New Hampshire. "Sometimes, though, I wish I had more time to *play* outside."

Which of the following statements would Joshua C. most likely agree with?

- A. Kids today should only participate in organized activities due to the safety risks of playing outside.
- B. Kids today play too many of their sports games online.
- C. Kids should have time for both organized and unorganized activities outside.
- D. Kids already spend too much time outside.

**5. What is the main idea of this text?**

- A. Kids in urban areas should be provided with cleaner parks, more accessible indoor recreation areas, and safer routes to outdoor activity areas.
- B. Playing outside is beneficial for your body and mind, and there are many ways to enjoy the outdoors.
- C. Young kids today will face obesity when they are older if they do not learn to exercise.
- D. Students would perform better in school if they played outside more.

**6. Read these sentences from the text.**

**Recapture your childhood** . Remember what it was like to climb around on a jungle gym or swing or play Four Square? Why should little kids have all the fun? Revisit games you enjoyed as a little kid-playing games is a great way to relieve stress!

As used in these sentences, what does the word "**recapture**" most nearly mean?

- A. write down or record
- B. imagine in vivid detail
- C. go back to or live again
- D. take a picture or video of

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

The author clearly states that you do not need to live in a rural area to enjoy the outdoors; \_\_\_\_\_, many cities have parks and plots of trees within the city blocks.

- A. for instance
- B. secondly
- C. however
- D. obviously

8. Why is playing outside good for your health? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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**9.** Read these sentences from the text.

"Hiking, exploring, and fishing help hone all of your senses," says Betsy Keller. She's a professor of exercise and sports sciences at Ithaca College in New York. "Smell, sight ... [they're] all engaged when you're outside."

What does Professor Betsy Keller mean when she states that the activities can hone all senses?

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