

MARTHA CURRIE WELLNESS

MARTHA CURRIE ELEMENTARY'S HEALTH & WELLNESS NEWSLETTER

Why Children Need to Play Outside... Even in the Winter Months

As I sit and write this newsletter, I reflect back on my years of growing up in Port Kells. We were very fortunate to live behind Port Kells Nursery where there was LOTS of space to play, create, build forts, and do whatever we pleased. I am sure many of you can relate to those years of leaving your house, your parents not knowing where you were and not coming home till you heard your name called by your mom in the distance. Other memories might include a favorite climbing tree or a secret hiding place, learning to turn cartwheels with a friend, or playing tag with the family dog.

When the weather is nice and the sun is shining, most parents have absolutely no problem sending their children outside to play. Why? Because we all know that playing outside is good for our kids. Playing outside means that we can actually get a few things done inside without being distracted. Perhaps, this is why so many people dread the winter months?

As the weather changes from warm and sunny to cold and "dreary," this means that the kids can't go outside and play, right? Wrong! It is still necessary for children to go outside and play - even in the winter months. There are a lot of "real" benefits for your children when they play outside. Below you will find several of them.



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1. Builds Up their Immune System:

It's no surprise that many children that are raised on, or around, a farm are generally healthier than those that aren't. This is because on a regular basis these children are exposed to dirt, animals, pests, bacteria and everything else that send some parents running. While we like to think that dirt, animals, pests and bacteria do more harm than good, it's quite the opposite. When children come into contact with these things in a natural way (outside) and on a regular basis, they are less likely to develop autoimmune disorders and allergies.

2. Provides Exercise:

Playing outside provides children with something many children don't get enough of anymore - exercise. Exercising while having fun is the best kind of exercise, and that's exactly what playing outside does. Riding bikes, playing tag with friends, building a snowman, sledding, having snowball fights and other outside activities to get our children's bodies moving... something most video games can't do.

3. Stimulates the Imagination:

Sadly, one of the things that today's children are lacking is an imagination. This is because we're in the technological age - today children are literally shown everything. Why go outside and play cops and robbers when we can watch a movie about it or play a video game? Playing outside helps children develop their imagination, which is something that television, video games, computers, iPods, etc. don't do. (Goldie Hawn - 10 Mindful minutes).

4. It Provides Vitamin D:

It's important that your children get Vitamin D, which is provided by the sun. Vitamin D helps promote better moods, energy levels, memory, overall health and more. Just 10-15 minutes out in the sun will give your children their daily dose of Vitamin D. It doesn't matter if it is summer or winter outside, your children need everything listed above and playing outside is a great way to get all of the above, at once! Obviously, if it's blizzard-like conditions outside, your children should stay inside, but if it's nice outside, then bundle the kids up and let them play for half an hour or so.

5. **Contributes to Learning (social/emotional development):**

Outside, children are more likely to invent games. As they do, they're able to express themselves and learn about the world in their own way. They feel safe and in control, which promotes autonomy, decision-making, and organizational skills. Inventing rules for games promotes an understanding of why rules are necessary. Although the children are only playing to have fun, they're also learning at the same time.

- Communication skills and vocabulary (as they invent, modify, and enforce rules),
- Number relationships (as they keep score and count), and
- Social customs (as they learn to play together and cooperate)

6. **Learning to Appreciate the Outdoors:**

We can't underestimate the value of the aesthetic development promoted by being outside. Aesthetic awareness refers to a heightened sensitivity to the beauty around us. Because the natural world is filled with beautiful sights, sounds, and textures, it's the perfect resource for the development of aesthetics in young children.

7. **Promotes learning through their senses:**

Outside there are many different and wonderful things for them to see (animals, birds, and green leafy plants), to hear (the wind rustling through the leaves, a robin's song), to smell (fragrant flowers and the rain-soaked ground), to touch (a fuzzy caterpillar or the bark of a tree), and even to taste (newly fallen snow or a raindrop on the tongue). Children who spend a lot of time acquiring their experiences through television and computers are using only two senses (hearing and sight), which can seriously affect their perceptual abilities. (Goldie Hawn - 10 Mindful Minutes).

8. **It Promotes Problem Solving Skills:**

Children who play outside learn how to solve real life problems better than children who are always in their rooms playing video games or secluding themselves. If they're learning how to get along with friends or trying to figure out the best way to build a fort - they're problem solving.

9. **Last but not least... a place to be noisy.**

Finally, what better place than the outdoors for children to be loud and messy and boisterous? Outside they can run and jump and yell, and expend some of the energy that can usually be annoying indoors.

Like adults, kids need exercise. Most children need at least an hour of physical activity every day. Regular exercise helps children:

- Keep a healthy weight.
- Sleep better at night.
- Kids who exercise are more likely to keep exercising as an adult.
- Help to build and maintain strong, healthy muscles, bones and joints.
- Aids in the development of important interpersonal skills—this is especially true for participation in team sports.
- Promotes improved school attendance and enhances academic performance.
- Greater self-esteem and better self-images.
- Children who are active report fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression and a better overall mood.
- Helps improve motor coordination and enhances the development of various motor performance skills.
- Prevents or delays the development of many chronic diseases (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, obesity, hypertension) and promotes health.

Conclusion:

In the past parents worried more about their children being home by the time the street lights came on. Then they worried whether or not they got the recommended amount of daily activity. Today the obesity epidemic among children ages 6-19 has reached 15 percent, almost quadruple what it was in the late 1960s.

As kids spend more time watching TV, they spend less time running and playing. Parents should limit TV, video game and computer time. Parents can set a good example by being active themselves.

Exercising together can be fun for everyone. Walking or biking to school can be a great way to increase exercise in the day and get outside.

Links to outdoor activities in BC - some great ideas:

<http://www.hellobc.com/british-columbia/things-to-do/outdoor-activities.aspx>

<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/>

Related books:

- The Power of Play - David Elkind
- Check out this video from Richard: <http://richardlouv.com/books/last-child/videos/>
- Simplicity Parenting - Kim John Payne
- Hold onto your kids - Gordon Neufeld - <http://neufeldinstitute.com/>
- 10 Mindful Minutes - Goldie Hawn
- The Conscious Parent - Shefali Tsabary
- The Last Child in the Woods - Richard Louv
- In this influential work about the staggering divide between children and the outdoors, child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation—he calls it nature-deficit—to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

Activities for the Great Outdoors:

- Nature walk - (Nature trails in Surrey) <http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/2294.aspx>
- Go ice-skating or rent some snowshoes and go snowshoeing. Why not go cross-country skiing?
- Build a winter bonfire and make s'mores. Or, take a blanket and a cup of hot cocoa and sit outside on your front porch swing.
- If you have the equipment, go winter-camping. If that's too ambitious, check out your state parks for cabin or yurt rentals. Once you're there, go on beautiful winter hikes (afterwards, a cozy fire is definitely in order).
- Take your dog for a walk. It's one of the main benefits of having and owning a dog. Attend a dog-sled race. You don't have to live in Alaska to see one of these - check your state's Department of Natural Resources page, they usually have a list of upcoming events.
- <http://www.hellobc.com/british-columbia/things-to-do/winter-activities/dogsledding.aspx>
- Go sledding.
- Build a fort and have a snowball fight with your kids (or your spouse/partner). Or buy a snow block maker and build an igloo. Why not even shovel paths in the snow.
- Feed the birds or go birdwatching. Make your own birdfeeders out of pine cones, peanut butter, and birdseed. Check out Campbell Valley Park.
- Go on a winter picnic. Take blankets, sandwiches and hot soup in a thermos. This might give you some fun, cheap date ideas for couples as well. Check out the Reifel Bird Sanctuary.
- Head out on a photo expedition to take pictures of the winter landscape.
- Have kids or dogs? Set up an obstacle course in the yard with jumps, tunnels and other challenges.
- Make snow paint. Simply add food coloring to water and put in a spray bottle, then go out and paint your yard!
- Geocaching is great fun. Places in Surrey: <http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/3103.aspx>