

## ARTICLE

### Play With Nature Today

*Article authored by:*

*Holly Hatton-Bowers, PhD, UNL & Julia Torquati, PhD, UNL*

Your parents or grandparents may have told you that kids need plenty of fresh air and sunshine. It turns out they were right: recent research tells us that playing outdoors in natural areas – those that have many elements of nature such as grass, trees, rocks, sand, and water – provides children with SO many benefits. Walking on uneven ground, climbing on rocks and logs, digging up worms, and navigating different kinds of surfaces (grass, sand, gravel) helps children to develop balance, strength, and coordination. Spending time in nature improves mood and restores attention. Pretend play in nature promotes creativity and problem-solving skills.

Adults also benefit from playing in nature. Spending time in greenspace, parks and getting outdoors in natural settings is a great way to get more physical activity, and it also promotes mental and emotional health. Studies find that taking walks in nature or greenspaces can decrease stress, increase creativity, and make you feel happier.

What do you need to support your child's development when taking time to play and be in nature? It is simple, but not always easy - slow down, be patient, and give children time to explore. Outdoor play that is unstructured, meaning children make up the play as they go, should be frequent and a regular part of their day. Notice as your child's mind and creativity come to life by having the chance to play in natural spaces. Suddenly a stick becomes a magic wand or a rock becomes lost treasure.

Be sure to take children outdoors at all times of the day from dawn through dusk so that they can experience the changes in sights, sounds, and smells associated with different times of day and different seasons. You can enjoy the birds in the morning and bats in the evening. Winter is a great time for stargazing because it gets dark so much earlier. Talk about the shapes the stars make. As we approach summer, grab a blanket, relax outside and snuggle while noticing the shapes of the clouds or the way the wind blows the leaves on the trees.

If you have an infant, carry them or lay them on a blanket and draw their attention to the sights, sounds, smells, and touch of nature. Let them hold flowers, gently rub their hands on pinecones or rocks, and talk about the sound of birds and wind in the trees. Remember that all of this is new and fascinating for them! Your toddler is ready to explore small things like ants, ladybugs, and seeds. Toddlers and preschoolers enjoy exploring the texture of sand and experimenting to find out what happens when you mix different materials like sand, soil, and



Helping kids grow healthier brains.

[123connectwithme.org](http://123connectwithme.org)

water. Young children can help with gardening by planting, watering, and picking fruits and vegetables. Playing with open-ended natural materials such as sticks, rocks, wood chips, and acorns supports creativity and imagination as children make nature stew in a bucket and celebrate dandelions. Many children love using natural materials to create forts or drawings.

Do not worry if you lack a large natural area near your home, because even small natural spaces can provide wonderful learning experiences for children. Small gardens or playing in the mud can offer endless opportunities for play, learning, and relaxation. Consider taking an old sheet outside and constructing a safe secret hiding spot near a tree. Gather pruned branches and leaves into a pile and let your child use their imagination. So leave those devices and screens alone and make time to play outside in nature today.

Learn Ideas to Collect Treasures Outside:

[Collecting Treasures](#) | [MediaHub](#) | [University of Nebraska-Lincoln \(unl.edu\)](#)

Find Your Special Tree

[Choose a Tree](#) | [MediaHub](#) | [University of Nebraska-Lincoln \(unl.edu\)](#)

Build an Outside Obstacle Course

[Outdoor Obstacle Course](#) | [MediaHub](#) | [University of Nebraska-Lincoln \(unl.edu\)](#)

Watch Clouds

[Cloud Watching](#) | [MediaHub](#) | [University of Nebraska-Lincoln \(unl.edu\)](#)

Nebraska Extension 4-H Clover Kids Program

<https://child.unl.edu/4-h-clover-kids-program>

Nebraska Extension Natural Learning Environments

<https://child.unl.edu/natural-learning-environments>

Children & Nature Network

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/families/>

Family Nature Play & You – eguide for families

[https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/aza\\_eguide\\_familynatureplay\\_update\\_r1v2.pdf](https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/aza_eguide_familynatureplay_update_r1v2.pdf)