

Getting Gifted Kids Outdoors:



Tips for a Summer of Play

By Dr. Leigh Ann Fish and Dr. Patti Ensel Bailie

For many, childhood memories are of outdoor play: “baking” mud pies, building forts, climbing trees, playing tag at the park, and constructing sand castles at the beach. Children today spend only half as much time playing outside as their parents did 30 years ago.¹ Childhood is moving indoors, yet research shows that a lack of outdoor play can have serious consequences for children.

There are several factors that are influencing this phenomenon. With more cars on the road and speed limits increasing, many parents are reluctant to allow their children to play, walk, or ride bikes on streets or near roadways.² Green spaces are also disappearing at an alarming rate, limiting the number of available parks. At the same time, many parents’ fear of injury or “stranger danger” means many children don’t take advantage of the limited green space available. Finally, kids may opt for “screen time” over play time, and increased participation in organized sports and other extracurriculars means kids don’t have as much time for play outdoors.

Kids who don’t have a lot of unstructured outdoor play are at risk for a range of negative outcomes:³

- Greater risk for unhealthy lifestyles and childhood obesity
- Fewer sensory-rich experiences
- Higher diagnoses of ADHD-type symptoms
- Lower academic performance in school
- Less empathy for plants and animals
- More apathetic/destructive attitude toward others
- Lower self-confidence
- Less independence
- Diminished creativity

The good news is that many of these can be reversed or restored by spending time outdoors! The benefits of outdoor experiences, although important for all children, can help nurture gifted children in many ways.

Improved Social Skills

Some gifted children crave time alone; others may want to engage with peers but find it difficult. Their advanced vocabularies and intellectual curiosity, when coupled with asynchronous social skills and heightened emotional sensitivity, can lead to rejection if others perceive gifted children as annoying, bossy, contrary, intense, serious, self-absorbed, negative, sarcastic, or boastful.⁴ Being in nature can provide space for being alone, but it may also advance interactions with others and build resilience in social situations by allowing children to practice social skills.



TIPS Provide opportunities for children to work together. Social skills such as communicating clearly, asking for help, encouraging others, disagreeing politely, actively listening, sharing resources, staying on task, waiting patiently, and resolving conflicts are practiced authentically as children build forts or collect tadpoles.

Sharing the natural world can foster prosocial behaviors and increased empathy. Children learn to look after each other when hiking on woodland trails. Learning to care for plants and animals may lead to greater sensitivity and care toward others.

Enhanced Emotional Well-Being

Gifted children's emotional intensity can fuel passion for learning and motivation to achieve, but it can also create anxiety, self-criticism, and doubt. Being outdoors in nature can offer a break from anxiety, providing a quiet space in which to relax and calm down. It can also boost self-confidence as children learn to persevere and overcome obstacles.



TIPS Make time for being outdoors on a regular basis. Provide quiet time in a natural area outdoors, such as near a lake or in the woods.

Help children find ways of expressing their intense emotions through stories, poems, art, music, journal entries, or physical activities—all which can be done in nature!

More Risk-Taking, Resilience, and Grit

Taking risks in academic or intellectual areas may be more comfortable for some gifted children than physical, social, emotional, or creative risk-taking which may come less easily or less naturally. Older gifted children, in particular, may have adopted risk avoidance behaviors, preferring tasks with clear, unambiguous steps or choosing to stick with what they can already do well. But children can't develop resiliency or grit when tasks are too easy. Spending time outdoors can be the perfect place

to practice taking risks, to try and fail and try again, and to put forward effort in overcoming obstacles. Doing so may contribute to a growth mindset rather than a fixed one.



TIP Give children autonomy to take risks outdoors. Exploring natural areas with trees to hang on and boulders to climb allows children to build confidence. If they don't succeed, help them view success by giving praise for effort rather than accomplishments.

Better Physical Health

When gifted children are asynchronous in their development, their intellect can outpace their physical maturity, leading them to struggle with fine and gross motor abilities.⁵ Outdoor physical activity can improve memory, enhance muscle tone, strengthen the heart and circulatory system, build strong bones, and help maintain a healthy body weight. Children who regularly play outdoors have been shown to eat and sleep better; outdoor play has been linked to improved eye health, healthier immune systems, and higher levels of Vitamin D.⁶



TIPS Climbing trees, balancing on logs, and hiking on trails can aid physical development on a large scale. Fine motor development can be supported by taking apart flower heads, pine cones, or seed pods to examine how they function.

Cross-lateral movement (crossing the body's midline) such as digging with a shovel, raking leaves, and sweeping with an insect net enables the two sides of the brain to communicate, strengthening nerve cell pathways.

Greater Curiosity, Creativity, and Imagination

Creativity should be nurtured in all children. Play in nature-rich environments provides variety and challenge requiring thoughtful decision-making to navigate. Whereas manufactured toys promote more predictable play, open-ended, natural materials encourage children to be inventive, imaginative, and resourceful.



TIPS Encourage children to use sticks or rocks in unique and inventive ways, such as making fairy houses, building forts, or creating works of art.

Feed children's curiosity by encouraging them to ask questions and investigate things in the natural world of interest to them. Model it for them by asking questions you wonder about and follow up by seeking answers.

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Ideas for Getting Outdoors This Summer

“Kidscape your backyard” or neighborhood.

Find ideas in *A Parents’ Guide to Nature Play* by Ken Finch or at www.greenheartsinc.org.

Start your own nature club. Download the Children & Nature Network’s free *Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit* to get started at www.childrenandnature.org.

Try nature journaling. Have your child choose a spot in a natural area to visit throughout the seasons to draw or write about what is seen and heard.

Take a hike! Walks or hikes can include:

- Providing lists or pictures for children to find on a natural scavenger hunt.
- Looking for animal tracks.
- Watching and listening for birds.

Micro-hike. Place a hula hoop on the ground and explore everything within the hoop using a hand lens.

Be a scientist or detective. Have a clipboard to record questions to investigate! Start small with the plants and animals in your own backyard, neighborhood, or local park.

Try a seasonal activity. Camping, skiing, snowshoeing, ice skating, boating, fishing, and other seasonal outdoor activities can be enjoyed as a family. Equipment can often be borrowed or rented.

Visit a local, state, or national park or Audubon center. In addition to exploring the site, many offer special events, classes, and programs for families.



But, My Kid Won't Play Outside!

Is your gifted child reluctant to play outside? Try these tips!

Resist perfectionism. Gifted children can be perfectionists and may obsess over feeling inexperienced, needing the right clothes or gear, or feel frustrated with their own lack of expertise in new situations. You don't have to be an expert and neither do they. Resist these pressures and adopt an attitude of *"Let's learn this together."*



Modeling. Watch your words and reframe your outlook. Gifted children are keen observers and may be modelling and internalizing what they've heard family members say or do. Instead of reactions like, *"Ew, that bug is really gross,"* make it cool by saying, *"Wow, that bug is really interesting. I wonder what it is?"*



Grab a hand lens, a jar to collect it, and use a field guide to find out.

Connect to interests. Connect outdoor activities to their interests. A bonfire and s'mores can be a great way to introduce stargazing that could lead to fascination with the night sky. For children who delight in all things weird or gross, focus on plant or animal "super-powers" or scat identification hikes. If your child is into carpentry, try building bird or bat houses together.



Gear up or cool down. For children who claim to wilt in the heat, give them a variety of loose parts and access to water (hose, buckets, barrel, or squirt bottles). They can build their own micro water park. If sensory experiences are too overwhelming, offer gloves or tools when playing in sand, dirt, mud, or water. Use waders for children who don't like the sensation of getting wet and pack extra clothes in case they need a quick change.



Find like-minded peers or mentors. If your gifted child struggles with making social connections, try connecting



them with people they are already comfortable with, like kids in their neighborhood, older children, or adults who share an interest in nature or outdoor play. Introducing one new thing at a time frees them to engage outdoors without adding social pressure to conform.



Dress for the weather. Outdoor enthusiasts say, *"There is no bad weather, only improper clothing."* Use boots, waders, mud suits, rain gear, and snow gear to extend play across the seasons.

Create garden art. Visually and creatively gifted children can plan, draw, and plant vegetable, herb, or butterfly gardens. The reward comes when they harvest and eat what they planted or when they attract brightly-colored visitors.



Incorporate technology (if necessary). For children who are tech-savvy, incorporating some technology into their outdoor adventures may get them outside. GPS devices can be used for geocaching and orienteering. Digital cameras can be used for photography and videography. Handheld devices, such as the *Identifier*, can be taken on hikes and used to identify common bird calls and frog sounds. Apps, like *SkyView*, use augmented reality to overlay constellations, planets, and heavenly bodies over your own location in real time.



Set time limits. For children who are extremely resistant to going outdoors, setting a time limit may help.

-Dr. Leigh Ann Fish and Dr. Patti Ensel Bailie

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Reduction in ADHD-Type Symptoms

Many gifted children show high levels of intellectual, emotional, physical, sensory, or imaginal intensity called overexcitabilities. Some researchers suspect overexcitabilities play a role in the misdiagnosis of ADHD in gifted children, especially those with psychomotor (physical) overexcitability. Recent studies suggest that there is a reduction in symptoms of ADD and ADHD when children play in natural areas.⁷



Nature can provide a release for pent-up energy and tension in safe, gratifying ways. Choose outdoor sites like parks, prairies, or wooded areas where children can run, climb, and explore.

Getting Started

As a family, where do you start? Families should consider a variety of opportunities for spending time outdoors with their children, in both structured and unstructured play. First-hand, multisensory encounters with nature don't have to be wilderness experiences. Even time spent on a patch of ground, in the corner of a yard, or "on the fringes" can work. If you don't have a backyard, find a local park to explore.

One of the most important things you can do is model the desire to be outdoors, get your hands dirty, and share your enjoyment of the natural world. Prioritizing time in nature makes sense on a total development level for all children. So much so that some advocates are now calling regular time in nature as a right that should not be denied.⁸ We believe the benefits for gifted children are no exception. ☺

Resources

Acorn Naturalists

www.acornnaturalists.com

Children and Nature Network

www.childrenandnature.org

Green Hearts Inc.

www.greenheartinc.org

Insect Lore

www.insectlore.com

University of Maine at Farmington's Nature-Based Education Resource Guide

<http://umf.maine.libguides.com/naturebasededu>

Authors' Note

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Endnotes

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 - ⁸ Kernan et al., (2010).