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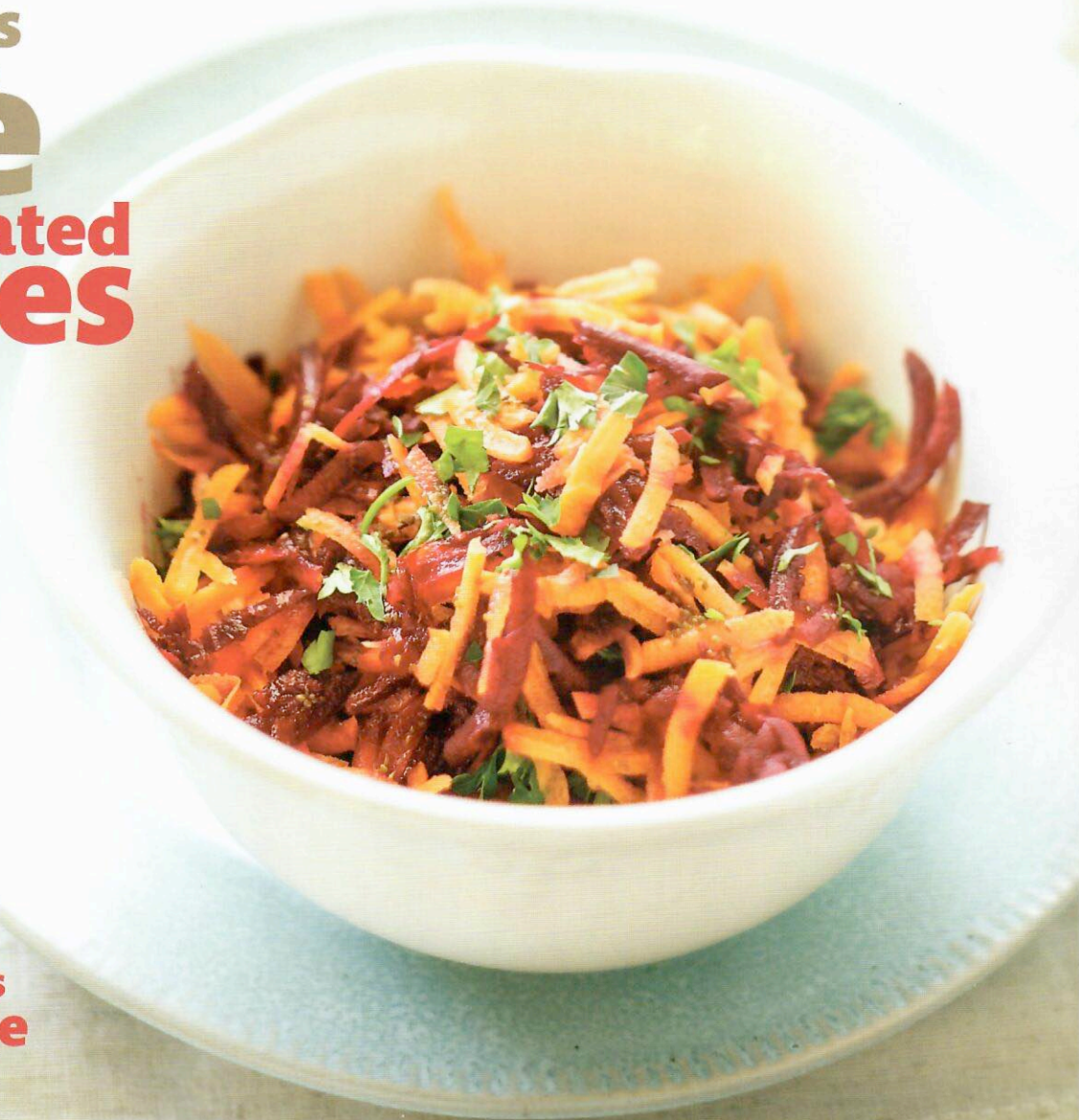
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Go Outside

in Nature and Air

A FAMILY PRESCRIPTION FOR Nature-Deficit Disorder

By Christa Melnyk Hines

What is Nature-Deficit Disorder?

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the average American spends 93 percent of their time indoors and in their cars. Urbanization, disappearing green spaces, and immersion in technology is accelerating the disconnect. Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, coined the phrase “nature-deficit disorder” to describe the ramifications to our children’s mental and physical health as society spends more time indoors and becomes further disconnected from nature.

As anxiety, depression, and stress-related health conditions continue to rise among children and adults, the best prescription might be as simple as giving nature more of your attention.

Research finds that time outdoors improves your overall fitness, helps you sleep better, enhances creativity and cognitive skills, boosts your ability to fight disease, and even helps children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety better regulate their moods.

“Exercise and nature are the prescriptions that have helped my kid,” says Tammy Muzrall, whose 11-year-old son Nathan struggles with anxiety and social issues. “Nature is calming. It’s healing. It naturally rebalances you. All you have to do is walk in it.”

About four years ago, she began taking Nathan to the Blue River Forest School in Overland Park, Kansas, which Kelly Daniels, a therapy guide trained through

the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, facilitates on her 10-acre property. Daniels started the school as a way to engage people of all ages with nature through play, exploration, and awareness.

SPENDING TIME IN THE TREES



Researchers in Japan have found that time spent slowly walking through the woods cannot only lower stress and blood pressure, it can also lower risk for cancer. They found that when we walk through a forested area, we breathe in aromatic chemicals released by evergreens called phytoncides, which can increase our body's natural killer cells. These white blood cells strengthen the immune system and decrease cancer-causing inflammation in the body.

Because of these health-enhancing results, the practice of spending time surrounded by trees in nature is a common healing and preventative health-care modality in Japan.

The Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, which facilitates training sessions all over the globe, takes the Japanese practice one step further by integrating a supportive sense of community. Participants take time to connect with other forest-goers in between time spent walking through nature on their own.

"People are connecting with one another as well as with nature," Daniels says. "This gives people the opportunity to be acknowledged and heard. When you combine that with the slowing down in the forest, it's powerful for people."

FINDING PEACE AND CALM

Nathan enjoys both the social and playful aspects of the forest school.

"To find other like-minded kids who are wired like us was a breath of fresh air," Muzrall says. "He loves jumping in the pond and climbing the trees. And sit spots are his favorite."

Daniels describes the sit spots as transformative. Sit spots don't include any specific agenda. Each child finds a patch of grass, a tree, or any spot that appeals to them where they can sit alone and just



notice what is happening around them. They don't have to sit perfectly still. They can dig around in the dirt, watch for wild animals, or listen to the birds.

Daniels says children often arrive at Forest School hyper, fidgety, nervous, and sometimes cantankerous. After circling up, talking, and playing a game, the kids, who often range from six to 11 years old, do the sit spot exercise.

"If you slow down and look, you'll see all kinds of crazy stuff. Even in a little square foot of dirt, there is more stuff going on than you can ever imagine. It's pretty powerful for them," Daniels says. "They are experiencing nature in a slow enough way that they realize, 'Oh. I remember. This is what it feels like to be peaceful.' They almost don't even know what that feels like anymore."

After 15 to 20 minutes, the kids are invited back to the circle, where they can share their experience if they'd like. One child might report seeing a wild turkey with its babies, while another might talk about a snail crawling up her arm.

Daniels says that when the children come back together after these breakout sessions, their demeanor has changed. "They become respectful of other kids speaking. They start to listen. By the end of the camp, they're mellow, hanging out, respectful, and kind."

If you and your family can't escape to a nearby green space, your own backyard can be the next best thing. Even 30 minutes a day spent sitting in your yard, watching nature in action and listening to the sounds around you from birdsong to the breeze winding through the plants and trees, is therapeutic for adults and kids alike.





COMBATTING SENSORY DEPRIVATION

Outside of school and extracurricular activities, today's kids typically spend several hours a day immersed in low-sensory, virtual landscapes rather than outdoors playing in the mud, climbing trees, examining bugs, rolling down hills, or making up games.

"Technology is addictive, and it's keeping kids from engaging the senses, developing the muscles, and all of the fundamental things that help children develop properly," says pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom, author of *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children*. She is also the founder of TimberNook, an international, nature-based development program for children ages 18 months to middle school.

"We're at the point where we are seeing kids have pretty significant sensory issues because it's almost like a sensory deprivation of our environment. They're not integrating that touch sense, and they are not getting what they need to organize the senses, which essentially organizes the brain," Hanscom says.

As a consequence, kids are less focused, get frustrated more easily, and struggle with more advanced social skills, like negotiation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

Through her programs, Hanscom has watched aggressive kids transform into more gentle souls, and she's seen children who are afraid overcome their fears.

"Parents say their kids are calm and grounded after going through the program," Hanscom says. "They have a different kid. The child is all of a sudden inspired to play outside. They're being creative. They're able to socially connect with children, whereas they couldn't before."

Have you ever noticed how after taking a walk outside, you feel calmer and more at ease? That's no accident. Our bodies are inherently designed to interact with our natural environment.

Movement and outdoor play help us regulate our emotions. Physical activity strengthens the vestibular system, which is where the body

IDEAS FOR OUTDOOR PLAY FOR FAMILIES

- ✦ Plan a backyard campout.
- ✦ Lie on a blanket and gaze at the stars.
- ✦ Pick and press flowers.
- ✦ Go geocaching.
- ✦ Go on regular nature hikes. (Don't forget water, snacks, sunscreen, and bug repellent.)
- ✦ Play nature bingo. (Check Pinterest for ideas.)
- ✦ Do a photo scavenger hunt where you take pictures of designated items, such as a colorful leaf, a worm, a cloud, etc.
- ✦ Fly kites.
- ✦ Ride bikes.
- ✦ Plant a garden.
- ✦ Go on a picnic.
- ✦ Explore a new park or playground.



IDEAS FOR PLAY MATERIALS

Encourage children to be creative in their outdoor play by providing a variety of materials. You'll be amazed how they can turn the simplest item into a toy or game!

- ✦ Sheer curtains
- ✦ Buckets
- ✦ Age-appropriate tools
- ✦ Planks
- ✦ Pulleys
- ✦ Loose parts
- ✦ Empty baskets
- ✦ String
- ✦ Old kitchenware
- ✦ Trays

SOURCE: ANGELA HANSCOM, AUTHOR OF *BALANCED AND BAREFOOT: HOW UNRESTRICTED OUTDOOR PLAY MAKES FOR STRONG, CONFIDENT, AND CAPABLE CHILDREN*

manages balance and spatial orientation. The vestibular system feeds into the limbic system, which is the body's center for emotions.

"If a child tends to be hyperactive, or if they are moving a lot or really fidgety, that means they need to move more. That movement will help their body to naturally regulate their emotions," Hanscom explains.

PROMOTING SOCIAL SKILLS AND CREATIVITY

Because outdoor play can be invaluable to building social skills, Hanscom encourages parents to refrain from jumping in to problem-solve kids' dilemmas on the playground.

"It's important for adults to recognize that play is an essential part of a child's world. Authentic play is the best place for kids to work out issues. They want to keep playing, so they negotiate and figure out a way to keep the game going," she says.

Jodi Crutchfield, of Evergreen, Colorado, agrees. Her two children, Addi, 8, and Sammy, 5, are happiest outdoors.

"If they stay indoors all day, they fight a lot more and get bored more easily. Outside, they don't need toys. They find bugs, spiders, caterpillars, bones, flowers, leaves, sticks, logs, and they just play," Crutchfield says. "They put all of their energy into creating games, sometimes quite elaborate. They do fight, but it's amazing how they seem to work it out better outside."

Living in the mountains where the family has access to hiking, mountain biking, paddle boarding, and camping has its advantages, but they also enjoy simply hanging out at home, where Crutchfield's children kick the soccer ball around the yard, play in the sandbox, or climb into their treehouse to play games like tic-tac-toe on the game board they made.

CULTIVATING AN APPRECIATION FOR THE PLANET

According to the Nature Conservancy, only about 10 percent of children spend time outdoors every day. Kids say spending time outside is boring, uncomfortable, or inaccessible.

Crutchfield is one of a growing number of parents who want to make sure their children foster an appreciation for the outside world. "They have learned how cool animals, bugs, and spiders are. We can play with them a little bit, but we don't hurt them, and we put them back where we found them," Crutchfield says. "They understand the idea of leaving no trace. They pick up garbage when we are on hikes and can spot a piece of garbage 100 yards away."



WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO DO?

Kids will often complain that there is nothing to do outside. Hanscom suggests phasing yourself out as the idea-giver by encouraging your kids to get inspired by their environment. Try throwing in a few age-appropriate supplies and tools to rev up their imaginations.

"Place out different items, like trays or kitchenware, by mud puddles," she says. "Bring out baskets with pulleys, string and scissors, or planks and trucks by a slow-moving river. Giving them materials quickens the process of being creative and having ideas of what to do outside."

Also, make sure you give your kids ample time and space to play. Invite friends for a day of outdoor play rather than just for a few hours, thus giving them time to inspire each other and come up with ideas for their discoveries. For example, how many ways can they use a stick? One child might use it to write, while another might use it to begin building a fort.

"Kids go around with technology bombarding them all the time," says Daniels. "When you take them outside, it connects a different part of themselves that they don't connect with anywhere else. It's very powerful for them." ❖



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Christa Melnyk Hines is the author of *Confidently Connected: A Mom's Guide to a Satisfying Social Life and Happy, Healthy & Hyperconnected: Raise a Thoughtful Communicator in a Digital World*.