

Health benefits from connecting children with nature

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Spending time in nature improves mood, reduces stress and promotes better physical health.

Despite the countless benefits, it has become increasingly difficult to separate ourselves from our busy schedules, [electronic devices](#) and creature comforts to spend time outside.

Helping children connect with nature is critically important, experts say. In addition to the health benefits, spending time together outside can promote stronger parent-child attachments, teach children that [natural](#) resources are not limitless and inspire them to protect our environment.

The University of Alabama's Dr. Caroline Boxmeyer offers some ideas that may help.

- Visit favorite local nature spots: The UA Quad, Marr's Spring, the Park at Manderson Landing/Riverwalk and the former Bryce property all offer beautiful nature scenery right on campus. Other inspiring places nearby include: the UA Arboretum, Moundville Archeological Park, Munny Sokol and other PARA parks, Lake Lurleen State Park, Hurricane Creek and Lake Tuscaloosa. Or, simply step outside and notice the natural beauty around you.
- Build outdoor time into your family's routine: It is easier to get children to spend time outside when it is a valued and predictable part of their day. Get in the habit of taking a walk, playing or

sitting outside around the same time each day. On the weekend, reserve longer amounts of time for favorite outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, fishing, boating) or simply to spend unhurried time together outside. Consider taking part in a family nature club.

- Dress appropriately: There is a saying, "there is no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing." Children will stay outside longer when they have clothing, shoes and gear (water, bug spray, hat, sunglasses, etc.) that help them feel comfortable in the current climate.
- Let your child get dirty and take risks: Don't be afraid to let your child jump in puddles, make mud pies and splash rocks. Getting wet and dirty is an important part of the fun. Taking moderate risks is important, too. Let your child climb trees, traverse steep slopes, jump off boulders and balance on fallen logs. While this may lead to some spills, your child will gain immense knowledge about his or her body, physics, when to take risks and when to pull back.
- Create nature art: Enjoy being creative in an environmentally-sustainable way. Use sticks, rocks and leaves to create nature art. Teach your children about impermanence by letting them destroy their creations or by watching a creation decompose over time.
- Wonder, experiment and imagine together: Inspire curiosity by making observations out loud such as, "I wonder why some trees still have all of their leaves while others do not," or "I notice a lot more worms out today, I wonder why that is ..." Try building several mud dams and observe which one holds water best. Test which structures and materials make the best fairy or gnome houses. Play hide and seek acting as different forest critters. This is STEM education at its best.
- Grow a garden together: Let your child experience the magic of watching a plant or flower grow from seed. Plants that are large or edible are especially exciting. So, try growing giant sunflowers, strawberries, tomatoes or carrots. Children are more

- willing to eat vegetables that they have had a hand in growing.
- Incorporate electronic devices: If it is too difficult to leave the electronic devices behind, find ways to include them. They can be great tools to practice nature photography, go geocaching or to have a nature scavenger hunt.
 - Notice the effects of spending time outside: Notice whether you feel more calm and connected when you spend time outside or doing other activities. Encourage your child to pay attention to this, too. Let your observations guide how you and your family spend [time](#) in the future.

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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