

# Q&A: Nature exposure can ease ADHD symptoms

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As organizations bring attention to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder in October for ADHD awareness month, a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert says time in nature can ease symptoms of the common child- and adulthood condition.

Andrea Faber Taylor, teaching assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at U. of I., specializes in human dimensions of the environment and has [studied the impact of nature exposure on children with ADHD](#), as well as related impacts of nature on [self-regulation](#), self-discipline, and [learning](#) in children.

In a key study, she found a 20-minute walk through a park was as effective for children with ADHD as methylphenidate—a common stimulant medication used to treat the condition—to temporarily improve concentration. In the study, she proposed "doses of nature" could be prescribed as a safe, inexpensive, and accessible tool for managing ADHD symptoms.

"Children with ADHD experience symptoms that mimic attentional fatigue," Taylor said. "If you're attentionally fatigued, you are more impulsive, less able to stay focused, not as good at delaying gratification, and unable to think long-term. Our research shows that for children with ADHD, being in a green space is more supportive of them operating in their [attention deficit](#) than in other settings."

## **Just what is it about nature that supports children with ADHD?**

"Time in nature is associated with reductions in markers of physiological stress: heart rate, blood pressure, and more. But the attention restoration theory suggests nature allows us to recover from [mental fatigue](#) and overstimulation, which is especially important in [children](#) with ADHD,"

Taylor said.

"Most of the time, they have to direct their attention, tune out distraction, and stay on task with things that are not intrinsically interesting to them. But elements of nature, like watching a fire or flowing water, draw on a different kind of attention that's more gently engaging. They keep your attention intrinsically. And when you're in that state, it doesn't fatigue with use; you can watch clouds go by or observe an ant colony and pay attention to it for a long time, but you won't feel depleted or fatigued afterward."

## **Does green space have to be green? We're in fall, and winter is coming.**

"It's not so much the color green as the natural processes that gently engage and restore our attention from fatigue. Those processes are still there during fall and winter. You still see the wildlife, you still see the wind moving through the trees," Taylor said. "Hardcore researchers would say you really need to just get outside; just bundle up. But we've done research that suggests even looking at views of nature through windows can be beneficial," said Taylor.

## **What are the lasting benefits?**

"Sometimes people say, 'Well, I went to the park, and I didn't feel any better while I was there, so it didn't work.' But the research shows it's more of an after-effect; you're resting and recovering while you're there and afterward, your focus improves," Taylor said. "I think the most practical takeaway is that even short exposures to nature can be beneficial. So don't hold out for the weekend deep-woods hike; the research shows more frequent, shorter exposures to nature are also beneficial and can have a lasting effect."

## What would you tell parents and teachers?

"Your child comes home from school and they're very attentionally fatigued from a long stressful day, with all the social interactions and requirements for staying on task. They could choose to go to the backyard or a neighborhood park for a little bit, or they could go to the basement and play video games. Based on the research, the best choice is to go to the backyard or to the park," Taylor explained.

"They're going to recover more from the fatigue and have a little more capacity to do homework at that point than they would from playing video games. I've always said to parents, just try it. Figure out for yourself what green setting is most supportive and compatible for your child, as well as what time of day or what length of time is needed," she continued.

"For teachers, just recognize that kids are becoming attentionally fatigued as the day wears on. Taking breaks in a green space, especially if they can be intentional about interacting with the [green space](#), can really help. Or setting up [natural elements](#) in the classroom quiet corner, such as an aquarium or terrarium, could even be beneficial."

Provided by College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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