

## Opening a Child's World to Nature Can Enhance Learning Potential

By Eileen S. Kupersmith, M.Ed.

Children have a strong connection to the natural world. Yet, experts agree that today's children are nature-deprived, spending less time outdoors in free, unstructured activities.

Think back to the deepest, most joyous times of your childhood, and it is likely that these moments took place outside. We know that outdoor, unstructured play is vitally important, not only for physical health, but also for emotional and intellectual growth. However, recent studies confirm that children spend more time behind locked doors, involved in sedentary pastimes such as playing computer or video games, or watching TV.

Yet, many schools have limited or eliminated recess. Even time spent at a typical playground falls short of meeting a child's every need for outdoor play. Although there are structures to climb and room to run around, there usually is not enough natural material to work with within a playground setting.

Children are drawn to natural material, if available. In playgrounds that offer materials such as tree stumps as seats, or stepping stones, gardens and other plantings, or, perhaps, a place to dig, I have witnessed children ignore impressive man-made play equipment in favor of natural material as they seek new outlets for imaginative play.

A growing body of research shows that time spent in "green spaces" leads to greater emotional resiliency, as well as stronger academic skills

We know that when we help children make deeper connections with the natural world, we inspire

a life-long sense of wonder. Children growing up with nature all around them are more resistant to stress and have a lower incidence of behavioral disorders.



Regular experiences in natural settings tend to reduce obesity, stress and aggression. Activities in natural settings may also help to decrease symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder, and can relieve cognitive weariness.

Time spent out in nature enhances all of the domains that are necessary for success in school and beyond, and can lead to:

- Heightened sense of wonder—the motivating force for productive observation, discovery and development of theories that forms the basis of scientific discovery.
- Enhanced emotional well-being—the basis for higher intellectual thinking.
- Enhanced use of senses and higher work productivity.
- Improved memory performance and attention span.
- Increased creativity.
- Improved physical health, including less stress, depression and illness, and faster healing time. (Too much stress interferes with optimal learning ability.)

Richard Louv, author of *The Last Child in the Woods* and *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*, speaks to our need for a regular "dose of vitamin N." He suggests that it is possible to combat nature deprivation in one's own backyard by:

- Planting a garden with native species to encourage butterfly and bird migration routes.
- Hanging bird feeders.
- Encouraging children to dig holes or build forts.
- Picking one tree and noting the changes from season to season.
- Taking hikes and nature walks.
- Observing and enjoying weather changes, and spending some time outdoors every day unless the weather is too severe.