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## Nature's Way

By Annabel Brown

***Do you ever wonder how our children's futures will be shaped by the environmental challenges that we're facing? With sustainability the seeming buzzword of the century, 'greening' our parenting can seem like a daunting task. The good news is that it's not only environmentally positive, but has many benefits for your child's wellbeing. What's more, it's not difficult and can be a whole lot of fun!***

Anyone closely involved with young children can see only too clearly that they have an inborn affinity for the natural world. Little ones love playing with water, digging in the sand, watching beetles and collecting pebbles, shells and such, and as adults we often look back fondly on such experiences as times of happy discovery and learning. Sadly many children growing up today receive far less day-to-day exposure to nature than all the generations before them. Increasingly, children spend large amounts of time indoors and have vastly less opportunity for free, unstructured outside play than did their parents and grandparents. Yet nature play is worth protecting. It is a vital part of early learning, and now a growing body of research is showing the broad range of benefits it offers for children's intellectual and physical development and emotional wellbeing.

So, how has it come about that our children are, as a whole, spending less time exploring their outdoor world? Certainly some major contributors are screen-based entertainments such as DVDs and computer games, and the increased popularity of manufactured fixed-purpose toys. In addition, we tend to live more time-pressured and highly scheduled lives, and often prioritise structured activities even for very young children- sometimes at the expense of appreciating the many meaningful learning opportunities that are provided close to home by everyday life. In the increasingly urbanised environments in which we live, safe natural spaces for children to play in freely are becoming rarer, and concerns for our children's physical wellbeing dictate strict limits upon their freedom to roam.

Such factors are significantly influencing experiences of childhood today, and their effects upon our children are very real- to the extent that our disconnection from the natural world is now sometimes described as 'nature deficit disorder'. According to Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, 'Nature-deficit disorder is not an official diagnosis but a way of viewing the problem, and describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities'. It seems that for children's innate connection with the wild world to flourish, it must be nurtured by the adults around them, and their contact with nature valued and prioritised as a vital part of childhood.

Being aware of this, many parents actively seek out nature-based experiences to stimulate and

enrich their children's learning. Day trips to beaches and bushland, zoo excursions and farmyard outings may all be memorable highlights in family life. However, even more important is cultivating a simple day-to-day attentiveness to our near surrounds. This can provide a young child with their most enduring and valuable source of connection to the natural world, and a sense of stewardship of their space and the many life-forms that make up its community. It's amazing how much there is to see all around when we stop to really look- the ants under the clothesline, the snails in the pot plants, the pace at which the clouds blow across the sky. Even an insignificant patch of grass takes on new meaning when minutely explored, and whole world can be found beneath a paving stone! By taking it slowly and being receptive to the child's own discoveries, a walk round the block can become an enjoyable adventure for child and adult alike. A butterfly wing, a seedpod, a smooth pebble- all these and more can be treasures to be cherished for a while and then returned to their home in the earth. A recent report from the children and Nature Network puts it like this- 'Quite simply, nature is good for us. Evidence shows that it is important, healthy and fun for children to have frequent and varied opportunities for play outdoors—and especially outdoors with natural vegetation—as a part of their everyday lives. When they do, they are happier, healthier and smarter.'

Recent years have seen growing interest from academics and researchers around the influence of nature on children's wellbeing. In combination with the first-hand understandings of parents and educators, these are beginning to provide a clear picture of the specific benefits of nature for children's development. Here are some of the key areas of benefit, and some ways that we can ensure these for our kids:

#### *Motor skills and healthy physical development*

For young children, play experiences in the outdoors provide endless opportunities to build physical confidence and interact with the world in a great variety of ways. Natural settings invite exploration- sand for digging, open spaces for running, skipping and jumping, branches for swinging, and rugged ground to be negotiated with ever-growing skill. Fine motor skills too are honed by the manipulation of delicate natural objects and the making of all kinds of 'special things'. Studies from Norway and Sweden confirm the physical advantages of nature play, with preschoolers who experienced daily play among trees, rocks and uneven topography showing greater gains in motor fitness- especially balance and agility- than those playing in conventional playgrounds. So next time you're out for a wander, keep eyes open for good places to practice balancing and climbing, and support children in extending themselves and taking that little bit of risk that will help their confidence grow. The chance for safe and playful engagement can be maximised by dressing kids sensibly with solid shoes, hats and well-covering clothing that it's okay to get dirty in!

#### *Thinking skills*

Being outdoors in nature can spark boundless curiosity, and help children to develop a fundamental love for learning. The natural world is full of things to be observed and investigated, checked out for subtle similarities and differences, opening endless questions as to 'why this?' and 'how that?'. Further, natural settings have a significantly positive effect upon children's ability to concentrate and focus. There is clear evidence from US studies that children diagnosed with ADD and ADHD function better following free outdoor play in a natural environment and researchers found that the greener their surroundings, the fewer symptoms the children showed. In another Swedish study that compared preschool children using a

traditional playground with others whose play area contained a field and orchard, the children with the field and orchard showed significantly greater powers of concentration at the end of the year. So, take time to observe the details of the natural world with your child, and love their questions! It doesn't mean you have to be an expert naturalist- it's the willingness to pay attention, watch and wonder from which they will gain the most!

### *Creative ability*

Children given free time outdoors very soon seem to look on their surroundings as a source of opportunities and resources for creative play. Whether it's through make-believe, building castles and cubbies, or making treasures, children respond with great creativity when open-ended materials are available to them- things which, unlike designed toys, have no fixed and singular purpose. In a Chicago study, children observed in green outdoor spaces engaged in more play and more creative forms of play than children in barren spaces. The study showed that preschoolers with access to a natural yard developed more varied and elaborate patterns of play. The richness and beauty of even the simplest natural forms nurtures children's aesthetic sense, and puts them in touch with the creativity of life itself- seen in insects building homes, plants producing flowers, the patterns made by water or wind. Such creativity is also fundamentally important to thinking and practical life skills like problem solving, constructing and even developing empathy. Elements of nature play can easily be included indoors by bringing natural materials into the home or playspace.

### *Emotional wellbeing*

Access to natural settings has well documented benefits when it comes to emotional coping and stress reduction- for children and adults alike... so take the opportunity to de-stress outdoors with the kids! A US study of 337 rural eight to eleven -year-olds revealed that regardless of a family's socioeconomic status, the greener the home surroundings, the more resilient children appeared to be against stress and adversity. The protective effect of nature was strongest for the most vulnerable children who experienced the highest levels of stressful life events. Indeed, the outdoors has been a refuge and a place of renewal throughout the ages, and for many of us, lying in the grass looking up through leafy branches has been a welcome source of comfort and connection. Natural settings, filled as they are with living things, can remind us of our place within the whole and provide a sense of grounding. By actively valuing children's regular time outdoors, we can help them to discover what may become a life-long source for maintaining balance and wellbeing.

The evidence to support the developmental benefits of nature play is great- so much so that it's a wonder we ever forgot its crucial value! As well as all the gains it can bring to the individual child, early contact with nature is closely related with environmentally sound behaviour later in life, fostering sense of stewardship for one's place and the planet. When children are exposed from an early age to diverse life forms, and made attentive to the changing seasons and the cycles of life, actions like saving water, flicking switches and buying the right brand of toilet paper make a lot more sense. In this way, something as simple as outdoor play can be one of the greatest gifts we give to our children- and to the earth too! In the process, we as parents can enjoy the gifts and wonders of discovering our surroundings anew. By slowing down, tuning in, and being attentive to the everyday nature all around us, we can foster our kids' innate connection with the wild world, and powerfully support the wellbeing of all.

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For your information, here are details of all sources quoted:

*According to Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods, 'Nature-deficit disorder is not an official diagnosis but a way of viewing the problem, and describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities'.*

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*A recent report from the children and Nature Network puts it like this- 'Quite simply, nature is good for us. Evidence shows that it is important, healthy and fun for children to have frequent and varied opportunities for play outdoors—and especially outdoors with natural vegetation—as a part of their everyday lives. When they do, they are happier, healthier and smarter.'*

**Nature Clubs For Families, Children and Nature Network, 2008, p. 2**

*Studies from Norway and Sweden confirm the physical advantages of nature play, with preschoolers who experienced daily play among trees, rocks and uneven topography showing greater gains in motor fitness- especially balance and agility- than those playing in conventional playgrounds.*

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**Grahn, P., Martensson, F., Lindblad, B., Nilsson, P., & Ekman, A. (1997) "Ute på dagis." Stad and Land 145. Håssleholm, Sweden: Nora Skåne Offset.**

*There is clear evidence from US studies that children diagnosed with ADD and ADHD function better following free outdoor play in a natural environment and researchers found that the greener their surroundings, the fewer symptoms the children showed.*

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*In a Chicago study, children observed in green outdoor spaces engaged in more play and more creative forms of play than children in barren spaces. The study showed that preschoolers with access to a natural yard developed more varied and elaborate patterns of play.*

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*A US study of 337 rural eight to eleven -year-olds revealed that regardless of a family's socioeconomic status, the greener the home surroundings, the more resilient children appeared to be against stress and adversity. The protective effect of nature was strongest for the most vulnerable children who experienced the highest levels of stressful life events.*

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