8 Mental Health Benefits of Getting Your Kids Outside, Plus Tips on How to Do It

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Between a global pandemic, social unrest, military conflicts overseas, and environmental catastrophes like wildfires and heatwaves, it's safe to say the first 2 years of the 2020s have been pretty stressful.

If you and your kids are feeling frazzled, isolated, anxious, or depressed, you aren't alone.

As of March 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a 25 percent increase in depression and anxiety worldwide.

This trend isn't limited to adults.

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

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, mental health-related emergency department visits from March to October 2020 increased 24 percent for children ages 5 to 11 and 31 percent for those ages 12 to 17 compared with 2019.

A spring 2020 national survey of 3,300 high school students found that a third of students felt unhappy and depressed much more than usual.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), this constitutes a children's mental health crisis.

While this may be a daunting reality to face as a parent, there are ways to help reduce the effects the last few years of turmoil have had on your kids.

One way is to get outside.

To some, this may seem too simple to work. For others, like those living in cities, it might seem inaccessible. Still, the science is in: Getting outside can greatly benefit your family's mental health.

Here are the facts on the mind-nature connection, plus tips for getting outdoors, no matter your circumstances.

The physical and mental health benefits of getting outside

It's no secret that the body and mind are connected. The research mentioned below shows that time outside has important positive effects on physical well-being. This can lead to better mental health outcomes in children and adults.

The following physiological changes may have a powerful impact on the emotional states of both kids and parents:

- reduced cortisol
- lowered blood pressure and heart rate
- increased vitamin D
- improved sleep quality and increased duration
- increased overall well-being
- improved cognition and creativity
- less rumination
- improved relationships

Reduced cortisol

Cortisol, a hormone produced by the adrenal glands, is known as the stress hormone. When it comes to mental health, it's best for the body to produce just enough — and not too much.

In an 8-week 2019 study of 36 urban dwellers, participants spent time in any outdoor environment that brought them in touch with nature. After doing so three times a week for 10 minutes or more, participants had a significant drop in cortisol, no matter what activities they performed outside.

"The chronic stress of our daily lives can lead to adrenal hyperstimulation and eventually fatigue," says Joel Warsh, a board certified pediatrician and the founder of Integrative Pediatrics. "By taking some time to step away to nature, [parents and kids] can reduce cortisol levels, decrease stress, and eventually change overall health."

Lower blood pressure and heart rate

Blood pressure and heart rate aren't just a window into your cardiovascular health. They're also important measures of stress in the body.

According to research from 2020, multiple studies showed that sitting or walking outdoors significantly reduced both blood pressure and heart rate.

The research showed that getting outside decreased the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, also known as the body's fight-flight-freeze response. While a useful short-term adaptive strategy, this nervous system

response can get stuck in overdrive and lead to long-term stress and fatigue.

Increased vitamin D

Research from 2018 estimated that about 42 percent of American adults

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 are deficient in vitamin D. Many kids don't get enough of this nutrient, either.

According to a 2016 study

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 of 330 children in Busan, South Korea, nearly 60 percent of participants ages 6 to 12 had a vitamin D deficiency.

Numbers were similar in an older 2009 study

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of U.S. children: 61 percent, or 50.8 million, were vitamin D insufficient (defined as between 15 to 29 nanograms per milliliter of blood), while 9 percent were vitamin D deficient (defined as less than 15 nanograms per milliliter).

"Lower levels of vitamin D have been linked to higher rates of mental health concerns," says Warsh.

These include:

- anxiety
- depression
- behavioral concerns
- decreased immune responsiveness

Time in the sunshine can boost levels of this critical nutrient in both adults and kids, which may ultimately boost mental health as well.

Better sleep

If you or your child gets poor sleep, you know how disruptive it can be for your entire household's well-being.

"If you're having trouble sleeping, you might feel more anxious, depressed, irritable, or on edge," says Gary Fedoroff, the director of experiential learning for Newport Healthcare. "It also impacts your distress and

frustration tolerance. Lack of sleep makes problems that arise feel less manageable."

Still, there's good news! A stint in the backyard or at the park could promote better rest and help stabilize emotional health.

In a 2015 study of over 250,000 adults, those who had access to a natural environment were more likely to get sufficient sleep.

Another 2021 study

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 of 14 countries examined the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on children ages 3 to 5. Researchers found that those who spent time outside were more likely to meet the WHO's global health guidelines.

One of the benchmarks? Adequate sleep.

Increased overall well-being

"For those suffering from anxiety and depression related to trauma, especially as a result of all that we've been through the last couple years with the pandemic, being outdoors can be of great benefit to improve emotional well-being," says Fedoroff.

Research from 2016 showed that the more time kids spend in green spaces, the more likely they are to experience greater emotional well-being.

One 2019 scientific review concluded that time in a natural environment benefitted a variety of components of emotional well-being.

These included:

- positive affect, or capacity to experience positive emotions
- a sense of meaning and purpose in life
- positive social interactions
- decreases in mental distress

The color of happiness just might be green.

Improved cognition and creativity

Your kids' brain development could also get an unexpected leg up from outdoor play.

In a study from 2021

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, higher daily exposure to woodland and green space was associated with higher scores for cognitive development in adolescents.

People of all ages may feel a sense of heightened creativity after enjoying the great outdoors.

"The outdoor world is filled with sights, sounds, and smells that ignite curiosity and invite active exploration, discovery, and new experiences," says Michelle Dean, LPC, of Connections Wellness Group.

"According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children need 1 hour per day of unstructured, outdoor play," says Dean.

She notes that the effects of outdoor play include:

- improved concentration
- increased cognitive functioning
- increased creativity
- enhanced motor skills

Less rumination

Sometimes, you need a break to get out of your head. Going outside as a family can help shake off unhealthy thought patterns, such as ruminating over problems.

"Activities that are positive and engaging, such as spending time outdoors, can effectively break the cycle of rumination," says Dean. "These healthy distractions can aid in temporarily diverting one's attention away from ruminating, hence decreasing the intensity of the emotions associated with the rumination and making it more manageable."

A study from 2015 found that people who took a walk in a natural setting experienced less rumination and less anxiety than those who walked in an urban setting.

Improved relationships between parents and kids

In a fast-paced, tech-focused society, it can be difficult for parents to find ways to connect with their kids. Time outdoors is one possibility for fostering more meaningful relationships.

"Unplugging from electronics to play in the backyard, go to a park, or take a walk can eliminate distractions faced while indoors, making it easier for parents to be emotionally available and build healthy, secure attachments with their child(ren)," says Dean.

"Children who have a strong, secure attachment with their primary caregiver(s) feel more comfortable to explore their environment and surroundings," Dean adds.

Fedoroff also points out that getting outside can clear the air when things are tense at home.

"When parents and children are together outside, it gives them the opportunity to share a common experience on neutral ground without the day-to-day expectations and confines of their home," he notes.

When nature isn't accessible

As we've seen, spending time in nature can be a reliable mood-booster. That said, a tranquil natural setting, like a coastline or forest, isn't accessible to everyone.

If you live in a city, can you still get the benefits of going outside? You can!

Any outdoor place where you can soak up some sun will provide vitamin D, and several studies listed above have found benefits from spending time in any outdoor environment that feels rejuvenating.

This can include:

- a public park
- your favorite neighborhood block
- a local zoo
- an artificial lake
- an empty field

- a rooftop
- a community garden
- a friend's backyard
- an overgrown lot (just make sure it's safe and legal)

There are also some creative options for getting out of the city.

If you don't have a car and public transport can't get you there, consider a rideshare service using apps like Waze and Moovit. These can be much cheaper than other popular rideshare apps.

If you can couple time outdoors with family fun, you'll create a one-two punch of positive feelings.

The take-home message? Enjoy whatever outdoor space you can, and you're likely to experience a mental health lift.

How to get more time outside as a family

Enjoying family time outside probably sounds like a nice idea. The trick, of course, is actually making it happen. Busy schedules and differing opinions among family members can get in the way of outdoor plans.

To build a habit of spending more time in nature, try these simple activities:

- Take a walk after dinner.
- Choose an easy hiking spot appropriate for everyone in the family.
- Visit a community pool in warm weather.
- Train for a local race with older kids.
- Let everyone choose a favorite outdoor activity, then schedule each one in advance.
- Keep a weekly family park date.
- Walk or bike to restaurants or shops in close proximity.
- Play a game or sport, like tag, hopscotch, croquet, or football.
- Have a picnic in the backyard or at a park.
- Choose outdoor equipment as gifts for birthdays or holidays.
- Make your outdoor space enjoyable with flowers, a garden, comfortable chairs, or pleasant lighting.
- Organize a block party.

Bottom line

Give yourself some credit. You and your kids have probably been through a lot. The good news is you've made it through.

Think of getting back to nature as a gift to yourself and your loved ones, even if it takes a little extra effort.