

The Link Between Outdoor Learning and Health & Wellbeing

In an increasingly digital world, where screens often dominate our attention, the profound benefits of reconnecting with nature are more important than ever. For children and adults alike, getting outside and engaging with the natural environment offers a wealth of advantages, particularly when it comes to learning. Outdoor learning isn't just a trend; it's a powerful approach that significantly boosts our health and overall wellbeing.

A Breath of Fresh Air: Physical Health Benefits

One of the most immediate and obvious benefits of outdoor learning for children is its positive impact on physical health.

- 🌿 **Increased physical activity:** Outdoor environments naturally encourage movement. Whether it is running, jumping, exploring, or simply walking, learning outside inherently leads to more physical activity than a traditional classroom setting. This helps combat sedentary lifestyles, reduces the risk of obesity, and improves cardiovascular health.
- 🌿 **Enhanced motor skills:** Navigating uneven terrain, balancing on logs, and engaging in hands-on activities like digging, collecting or building all contribute to the development of gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and agility.
- 🌿 **Improved vision:** Spending time outdoors, particularly in natural light, has been linked to a reduced risk of myopia (near sightedness) in children.
- 🌿 **Stronger immune system:** Exposure to a wider range of microbes in natural environments can contribute to a more robust immune system. Plus, fresh air can help clear airways and reduce the spread of airborne illnesses.
- 🌿 **Vitamin D boost:** Sunlight is our primary source of Vitamin D, essential for bone health, immune function, and overall wellbeing. Outdoor learning provides ample opportunity to soak up this vital vitamin.

Nature's Embrace: Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

Beyond the physical, the natural world offers a powerful antidote to stress and a significant boost to our mental and emotional states. For more information see:

<https://www.doseofnature.org.uk/studies1>

- 🌿 **Reduced stress and anxiety:** Numerous studies¹ have shown that spending time in nature can lower cortisol levels (the stress hormone), reduce anxiety, and promote a sense of calm. The sounds, sights, and smells of the outdoors can be incredibly soothing.
- 🌿 **Improved mood and happiness:** Exposure to natural environments is associated with increased feelings of happiness, vitality, and positive emotions. The fresh air and natural light can also help regulate circadian rhythms, leading to better sleep and improved mood.

- 🌿 **Enhanced cognitive function:** Research suggests that even short periods of time in nature can improve attention span, concentration, and problem-solving skills. The diverse stimuli of the outdoors can stimulate creativity and critical thinking in ways an indoor setting often cannot.
- 🌿 **Increased self-esteem and confidence:** Successfully navigating challenges in an outdoor setting, whether it's building a shelter, identifying a plant, or a problem-solving group activity, can significantly boost self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. Children, in particular, thrive on the freedom and autonomy that outdoor learning often provides.
- 🌿 **Promoting mindfulness and sensory awareness:** The outdoors naturally encourages us to slow down, observe, and engage our senses. The rustle of leaves, the chirping of birds, the scent of damp earth, these experiences foster mindfulness and a deeper connection to the present moment.
- 🌿 **Social and Emotional Development:** Outdoor learning often involves collaborative activities, fostering teamwork, communication, and empathy. Navigating social dynamics in a less structured environment can be incredibly beneficial for social and emotional growth, which can improve wellbeing and promote positive mental health.

The Learning Edge: How Wellbeing Fuels Education

It's not just that outdoor learning *coincides* with better health and wellbeing; there's a powerful symbiotic relationship. When individuals feel healthier and more emotionally balanced, they are better equipped to learn. We see so often at Field Studies Council centres on our day and residential visits, learners who might in class be struggling to learn or indeed a struggle to teach, come alive and flourish outside. The novelty and excitement of learning outdoors often lead to higher levels of engagement and intrinsic motivation. Concepts can be brought to life in a tangible way, making learning more memorable and enjoyable. Whether it is seeing a food chain happen in real life when a Dragonfly nymph eats a tadpole, or finding maths more fun when using angles to measure trees or fractions to describe results of a litter pick, or using metaphors to make up stories about clouds, there are so many opportunities to use the outdoors to enhance their learning. Hands-on, experiential learning in natural settings can lead to deeper understanding and better retention of information.

Conclusion

The link between outdoor learning and health and wellbeing is undeniable and multifaceted. By embracing the power of nature as a classroom, we are not only enriching our educational experiences but also nurturing healthier, happier, and more resilient individuals. So, let's step outside, breathe in the fresh air, and rediscover the profound benefits that await us in the great outdoors.

References:¹Jimenez MP, DeVille NV, Elliott EG, Schiff JE, Wilt GE, Hart JE, James P. Associations between Nature Exposure and Health: A Review of the Evidence. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021 Apr 30;18(9):4790. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18094790. PMID: 33946197; PMCID: PMC8125471.