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# SCHOOL TOOLS

MARCH 2022

## SPRING HAS SPRUNG!

Another school year is winding down. The CDC recommendations are changing, masks are becoming optional, and warm weather is on the horizon. Hopefully in the coming weeks, your children will be enjoying some time off on spring break and spending some time away from studies, catching up on sleep and self-care.

We have spoken quite a bit in past articles of *School Tools* and *Parents Corner* about social media usage and technology. At this point, technology is inevitable. Even if you are a strict no-tech family at home, your child is likely to be using devices at school when engaging in work. We know technology can be extremely beneficial in learning programs, working with children with intellectual disabilities, socializing, etc., but many of you likely also remember a time without these devices. Today's *School Tools* will be focused on the mental health benefits of spending time outside, physical exercise, and engaging in nature.

## *Ideas for Outdoor Time for Your Children/Teens*

- Set up treasure hunts
- Identify nature together
- Teach them responsibility through gardening or a bug box
- Have them bring along a camera/device to capture moments outdoors (especially for kids you feel you need to pry from their electronics)
- Create an outdoor picnic
- Encourage outdoor learning/studying
- Elicit your child's help with outdoor projects
- Ask your child to help you create something for outside your home (kids love to have a voice in the decision-making process!)

## THE BENEFITS OF TIME IN NATURE

According to the Child Mind Institute, the average American child spends about 4 to 7 minutes a day playing outside and over 7 hours a day in front of a screen. Those numbers seem outrageous, right? Many researchers find outside time not only enjoyable, but also necessary for brain development. They have found that kids and teens who spend time outside are happier, better at paying attention and less anxious than kids who spend more time indoors.

Spending time outdoors has endless benefits. One of the most important of these being the creation of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin, a chemical that nerve cells produce, is absorbed through the body in sunshine, regulating your child's mood, digestion, emotions and appetite. You may have heard this as the "happy chemical". Since we lack this natural absorption in the winter, it is important for children to spend time outdoors in the warmer months.

Outdoor play not only increases serotonin uptake, it also provides a long list of other positive effects.

Time outdoors encourages imaginative play and creativity in nature that children may not receive from the structured program on their devices. It teaches children responsibility in taking care of the environment and their impact on living beings. It activates all five senses, whereas staying indoors on a video game may not illicit these. Lastly, the Attention Restoration Theory finds that more urban environments, with more time spent indoors, require what's called directed attention, which forces us to ignore distractions and exhausts our brains. In natural environments, we practice soft fascination, a type of attention that creates feelings of pleasure, not fatigue.

All in all, outdoor experiences have been seen to greatly enhance a child's mental health.