



Hard to Get Young Kids Outdoors? Some Approaches

Building more outdoor time into little kids' lives matters; some tips to make it easier

By MELISSA RAYWORTH

The Associated Press

Lots of advice for modern parents provokes debate: Is nursing better than formula? Is full-day kindergarten enriching or exhausting? How young is too young for TV? Toss out these questions and watch the fireworks begin.

But ask whether today's children spend as much time playing outdoors and exploring nature as previous generations did, and you'll find little disagreement: They don't.

Across the nation, worried parents tell stories of neighborhoods where children are neither seen nor heard.

"I speak all over the country and it's a concern that comes up all over," says Harvard psychology professor Susan Linn, director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. "There is a growing movement of parents who are concerned and are trying to figure out how to get their kids outside."

Rosemarie Truglio, a Sesame Workshop vice president who has butted heads with Linn on the subject of marketing licensed characters, agrees fully on this topic. Episodes of this year's "Sesame Street" will focus on nature, she says, because preschoolers' lack of connection with it has gotten to be of critical concern.

"Children have that sense of awe and wonder," Truglio says. "We need to have parents encourage them to be outside and to engage in activities so that they are using their senses."

But even parents who love the outdoors say it's difficult.

Kristin Eno, founder and director of Little Creatures Films, produces videos about children interacting with nature. "My work is all about nature," she says, "and there are days when I might be here with my 14-month-old and have no time for going outside."

"But every time I do go out with her, I'm glad I did," she says. "You see this peace when she's outside."

Richard Louv's popular call-to-arms, "Last Child in the Woods," has made an impact since it was published in 2005 (a second edition was released in 2008). Many organizations, including Louv's own Children and Nature Network, offer parents tools and encouragement for building more outdoor time into their children's lives.

Why is it so hard, and what can be done? Some approaches:

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Obstacle: Both parents are at work, so no one is home to supervise young kids outside.

Remedy: Team up with other parents in the neighborhood to share supervision. Hire a baby sitter specifically for a few hours of outdoor play. Choose day care or a preschool that makes outdoor time a priority. Skip the gym in favor of an hour-long walk with your kids, or try to work outdoors on your laptop while the kids play in a safe area. "Some families," Linn says, "are getting together to have afterwork picnics outside."

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Obstacle: Parents fear their child could be abducted, injured or get lost, so they choose controlled indoor environments.

Remedy: Research crime stats in your neighborhood. Is it really less safe than a decade ago? If so, can you make your own outdoor space any safer? Louv says equipping kids with cell phones can help assuage worries about safety.

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Obstacle: Enrichment classes and indoor sports leave no time for outside.

Remedy: If the balance seems off, reassess. An hour outdoors can be as enriching — perhaps more enriching — than an hour of instruction indoors.

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Obstacle: Kids are too focused on screen media and electronic toys to play outside.

Remedy: A steady flow of research indicates that young children now spend many of their waking hours using electronics indoors. Reverse that trend at your home by decreeing that every hour of screen time be balanced by at least an hour outdoors. Then stick to it.

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Obstacle: Kids say they don't know what to do outside. They're less familiar with unscripted play and more likely to think the natural world pales in comparison with the digital one.

Remedy: Take a walk after the rain, Truglio says, and point out how precipitation changes the environment. Teach them how things grow (preschoolers may not realize plants and trees are alive)

and offer open-ended tools (a ball, a magnifying glass) to encourage creative outdoor play.

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Obstacle: "Kids aren't getting dirty these days. They're not playing in the mud, not playing in rain puddles," says Truglio, because parental tolerance for dirt has gone down. She calls it "the 'Eww!' factor."

Remedy: Accept the mess. Let the kids get dirty, and let them see you get dirty, too.

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Obstacle: I'm not outdoorsy, and there's not much nature where I live.

Remedy: Start a tiny windowsill garden with your child, says Truglio. Even simpler: Place a bean in a plastic bag with a damp paper towel and tape it to a window. Kids will be delighted when it starts sprouting roots. Also, point out buds on a tree or a planter of newly blooming flowers as you run errands with your child.

Don't wait until you can plan a full-day nature walk, Eno says. Outdoor excursions don't have to be elaborate. "Even if it's just 15 minutes" outside, she says, children will benefit.

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On the Net:

<http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/>

<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/>

<http://www.childrenandnature.org/>

<http://www.littlecreaturesfilms.com/index.html>

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