

Natural Connections: Children, Nature, and Social-Emotional Development

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Most people know intuitively that there is something magical about the experiences offered to children by the outdoors. We grew up hearing our parents and grandparents tell us stories about their childhood summers spent playing outside, interrupted only by a parent's call to come inside for dinner. It may have been a grandmother's accounts of life as a young child on an Iowa farm, exploring the fields, streams and woods with her brothers and sisters. Or a father's nostalgic memories of summers spent tagging along with the neighborhood's "big kids" and being allowed to enter into their suburban "kid culture" of alleys and yards—building secret hideouts, collecting treasures and making up their own games.

But we who advocate for children's greater access to rich outdoor experiences can no longer rely only on nostalgic anecdotes. Even our first-hand observations of the children in our care are not enough. Our twenty-first century society demands research to give credibility to our practices. We must be able to show a link between young children's connections with nature and their healthy development. The good news is that we, as child developmentalists, can meet that challenge. We present here some of the links we can find when we apply knowledge from the substantial research literature on young children's social-emotional development to the much newer area of children's connections with nature.

Healthy social and emotional growth depends on young children's access to the kinds of social interactions, experiences, and environments that will support them. We believe that these appropriate supports are enhanced by the presence of a rich outdoor environment. Early experiences with nature, especially in the company of parents, teachers, and peers, often leave lasting impressions that make the lessons learned there more salient and profound. Two basic conclusions from research guide our discussion of the ways children's connection with the natural world can foster their social-emotional growth.

First, young children acquire social and emotional competence in ways that are often different from how they acquire competence in tasks like naming letters or numbers. Social-emotional skills emerge through children's experience in close relationships and the varied activities that occur in relational experience, such as shared conversation, warm nurturance, and guided practice in learning capacities for sociability, responsibility, and self-control. Social and emotional skills also develop through the shared and solitary activities of a developmentally appropriate, enriched child care or preschool setting, including the opportunities for outdoor experiences that it provides. In such settings (as well as at home) young children develop understanding of other people's feelings and needs, are encouraged to feel empathy and caring, learn to manage their own behavior as responsible group members, and acquire a variety of other prosocial skills.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, *play* is a central context for social and emotional development in early childhood. Research shows that many kinds of play contribute to social-emotional competence in preschoolers, including pretend play, free exploration of objects in the environment, play through which children build and create (constructive play) and games with rules. Natural outdoor environments provide a context in which each kind of play is often more complex, extended, and self-determined.



In natural spaces, children have a freedom to play in ways rarely possible in even the most developmentally appropriate indoor environments.

Self

The development of *self* includes the process of gaining self-awareness, self-esteem, and developing an ever-deepening understanding of others. In the course of their play and interactions, research shows that young children are developing an emerging awareness of their own characteristics, including likes and dislikes, abilities, differences from other people, and the ways that others value them. This process requires broad and varied experiences and the opportunity to pursue their own ideas and interests to find out where they lead. Jane Perry writes of the features of the play yard ecology, in contrast to the classroom ecology. She reminds us that whereas the classroom ecology tends to provide children with explicit cues for activities and play scripts, the outdoor ecology provides more flexible cues, as well as invitations to invent more open-ended themes and roles. Loose parts and a lack of predetermined functions for the elements of a natural outdoor play space invite extended experimentation and adventurous exploration of one's own skills and dispositions, as well as those of one's playmates.



Growth of other competencies related to the development of self can also be positively associated with outdoor experience. We know from a large body of research that self-regulation requires the ability to sustain focused attention. Current research into attentional disorders has shown that children who have available views of nature from their classrooms are better able to focus their attention and control their impulsive behaviors. Other studies show that children who have learning or behavioral challenges tend to perform better in a natural outdoor setting. Nature evokes positive feelings that generalize to children's interactions with other people and their activities. Larger outdoor spaces allow for privacy and observation from a distance for children with slow-to-warm-up temperaments. Children can also withdraw when social interactions become too intense and find spaces in which to emotionally regroup.

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The outdoors offers an implicit invitation to young children to explore and take initiative in their own learning. A teacher does not need to encourage a child to pick up a shovel and dig into wet sand, crunch through piles of fallen leaves, or take note of two squirrels chattering as they race up a tree trunk. And, of course, splashing through puddles after a rain engages all the senses and prompts a stream of "Why?" questions.

The development of self also involves social and emotional understanding. Capacities for empathy and caring can be seen most readily outdoors, even in children who may have a hard time being kind and gentle with their peers. Randy White, citing the writings of David Sobel, notes that children feel a natural kinship with animals, and invest in them emotionally. He contends that one of the best ways to foster empathy and a caring attitude during the early years is to provide opportunities for nurturing relationships with animals. Those of us who spend time with young children outdoors have ample opportunity to model a similar car-

ing attitude and sense of responsibility toward other living things. Tending a vegetable garden, watering flowers and taking care not to trample small plants are behaviors children readily imitate and then begin to initiate on their own.

Social Interaction

Social interaction is at the heart of young children’s social-emotional development. This includes interactions with familiar adults, interactions with peers (including active and intentional cooperation, increasingly complex episodes of pretend play, and development of conflict resolution strategies), group participation, and developing cooperation and responsibility toward others. The outdoors is a setting that stimulates child-initiated interactions, especially with peers, and provides valuable opportunities for young children to experiment with the elements of peer culture.



The outdoors is the one place where adults are inclined to give groups of children freedom to choose their own partnerships and to play out the themes of cooperation and assertiveness, inclusion and exclusion that are new experiments for them, and are issues that will come to dominate their elementary school years. Children play chase, shriek in pretend terror, and shift scripts and roles frequently, giving each the experience of being both the pursuer and the pursued, the tiger threatening to pounce or the mice scurrying to hide. They can finally use their “outside voices” and employ assertive language to make their feelings known to playmates. As Jane Perry points out, wild running games are the children’s way of feeling connected.

Adults in an outdoor setting often relate to children more informally. They place props and other loose parts in the environment to provoke or build on observed interests. They assist children with language and other peer group entry skills. Beyond supportive functions, adults foster children’s social development by becoming engaged in minor play roles from the sidelines, offering comments and questions to facilitate peer interactions and elaborating on children’s themes. Research has shown that the longer the pretend play script is sustained, the more it contributes to children’s social and emotional skills. In the self-directed play of the outdoor play space, children are motivated to sustain social play for longer periods. In the process, they learn to rapidly interpret each other’s cues, employ sophisticated perspective-taking skills, modify rules and negotiate conflicts. Achieving proficiency in all of these areas is central to social-emotional growth.

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Relationships

With relationships, we come full circle—back to the emotional salience of close relationships shared in those treasured outdoor places of childhood. Whether the relationships are attachments to parents, close relationships with caregivers, or friendships with special peers, young children need a deep reservoir of positive shared experiences with others in order to form meaningful, sustained relationships with them. These positive relational experiences can occur in any context – home, school, or outdoors. But outdoor play provides special opportunities for the development of close relationships with adults and peers.

In these contexts, adults are more likely to allow children to

take the lead in shared activity, responding to the child’s initiative with no predetermined agenda, and looking for learning opportunities in whatever has attracted the child’s attention. Outdoor play is also likely to provide a foundation for deepening friendship with peers as children create their own adventures, discover another’s complementary interests, and respond to another child’s anger or distress with understanding. In many respects, the freedom of outdoor activity provides an inviting context for deepened understanding of another. Thus when we combine the crucial elements—sensitive, responsive interactions, extended child-directed imaginative play, motivation to pursue one’s own learning, and situations that elicit empathy and caring—the evidence is strong that natural outdoor spaces can provide a provocative context in which to nurture children’s close relationships.

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Conclusion

Although research on the influence of children’s experiences with nature in the outdoors is only beginning, the wealth of research on social and emotional development suggests that perhaps our parents and grandparents were right. In the unstructured, self-determined, and sometimes unexpected opportunities of natural play settings, young children have a chance to discover more about themselves and other people, to learn how to interact constructively with others, and to create the foundation for close relationships in ways that are unique and developmentally valuable.

Sources

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