

# The benefits of outdoor play on childhood stress

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Childhood stress and trauma is a big topic of reflection for caregivers and parents alike as we live through waves of pandemic life, and adjust to the changes and challenges it brings. Being a part of a nature-based nursery school is a source of pride for me because I know that our school philosophy supports children, caregivers, and families to form a lifelong connection to the outdoors and to the positive effects that natural spaces have on stress and general mental health.

## Natural spaces cultivate a sense of wonder and joy

The outdoor environment brings endless opportunities to gather treasures, investigate natural processes, explore through sensory experiences, engage with living things, test our physical capacities, and feel the freedom of open spaces. To observe a child outside is to see their motivations increase and their sense of wonder shine. Establishing habits of

finding the wonder and joy of natural spaces is a strategy for managing stress that can last a lifetime.



## Natural spaces support confidence and resilience through risky play

Children inherently take more physical risks when playing outdoors. Risk taking is essential for human development. It promotes self esteem, self regulation, confidence, problem solving, tolerance for failure, gross & fine motor skills, and more! These skills will empower children to assess their own capacities to problem solve and handle tricky situations. So, climb that tree! Balance across that fallen log! Skate across an icy puddle! You're building confidence and courage for whatever life brings you!



## Natural spaces encourage physical activity

Physical activity decreases the stress hormones in our bodies, and increases endorphins in the brain, boosting our mood and reducing pain. Outdoor play spaces encourage children's natural and physical play urges like running, climbing, and jumping. Natural environments also create opportunities for heavy work like lifting, balancing, and transporting stones, stumps, large sticks, and buckets of water, gravel, or sand. It provides space for pushing, pulling, and traveling. Supporting physical play urges and heavy work leads to increased self regulation skills, builds self esteem, and supports healthy sleep patterns after a long physical day of play.



## Natural spaces have a calming effect on our bodies and minds

There is a meditative element to slowing down in nature: listening to flowing water or rustling leaves, observing bugs scurry after lifting a large stone, making marks in the dirt with a stick, or laying down in the grass and closing your eyes to feel the sun's rays. Nature is a calming space for many. An opportunity to take a deep breath of fresh air and take things in with all your senses.



## Natural spaces can be YES spaces for big emotions and behaviors

Social Emotional Learning is an essential part of learning to understand our feelings, express them appropriately, and develop trusting and positive relationships with our peers and caregivers. The outdoor environment gives ample space for safe expression of big feelings through big, loud, physical and sometimes messy outlets. When given the space, children and caregivers can connect, validate, and say yes to emotional expression without

sacrificing the safety of others. Natural spaces are often “yes” spaces where children and caregivers can enjoy each other and play freely.

## Interested in some additional resources on outdoor play?



[National Wildlife Foundation- Benefits of Outdoor Play on the Heart, Mind, and Spirit.](#)



[Nature Explore – Family Outdoor Resource Kids](#)



[Northern Illinois Nature Preschool Association – Nature Blog](#)

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