

Parent Resource

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Nature as Stress Relief for Kids
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A mom of a toddler and preschooler shared her frustration with the evening “battles” in her house. She referenced that not-so-magical hour in between the end of the day and bedtime when kids seem to cry or become fussy for no identifiable reason even though it's way too early for bed.

I remember those days. This mom felt like she tried everything possible to improve their evening routine, and I had to agree. She pushed bath time up to promote relaxation. She tried coloring, reading, singing, dance parties, and games. She moved bedtime, dinner time, and story time. She really did try everything.

The only thing I could think of at the moment was to suggest getting outside for a few minutes. When my kids were that age, we took a “night walk” almost every night after dinner. There were nights when it felt like a lot of effort after a long day, but once we got out in the evening air, our moods always shifted. She agreed to give it a try. One week later she sent me a text: “I don’t want to jinx it, but I think it’s working.”

Nature play, or time spent in nature, boasts many benefits. One study of school children in Colorado and Maryland showed that access to natural areas — for elementary and high school students — is associated with reduced stress, increased focus and competence, and the ability to form supportive social groups. Time spent outdoors also:

- Gets kids moving (exercise is also associated with decreased stress and anxiety),
- Promotes creativity
- Increases confidence as kids learn to push their own boundaries and take healthy risks
- And gives them time to think.

While watching a group of ants might feel exceptionally boring to an adult with a long worry list in mind, time spent observing their natural environments does give kids a much-needed break.

Not everyone has access to large yards or green spaces, so it can be difficult to work in nature play. Another complicating factor at the moment is COVID-19. Large scale safer-at-home orders make it difficult to play outside right now. With parks — and in some states, trails, beaches, and other green spaces — closed for the time being, many parents are left wondering how to create that coveted green time. The good news is that, even in cities and small spaces, we can bring nature into our lives to reap some of the benefits.

Keep walking

While walking the same loop can become monotonous for caregivers, young children tend to view each walk as a new adventure. My son could spend an hour staring at pill bugs along our walks when he was three. A quick spin around the block ended up not being so quick, but the time spent investigating bugs, ants, fallen leaves and other interesting discoveries along our route fed his curiosity. Outdoor exercise is a great way to reduce stress right now. Find a safe route in your area and try to take at least two walks a day — here are ideas on how to get creative on those walks with your family.

Maximize your outdoor space

If you have a yard of your own, use it. It's easy to get into the habit of playing inside because kids like their toys and there are always things to cross off on the to-do list. When my kids were younger, I found that even bringing a board game or puzzle outside made a huge improvement in crankiness. If you don't have access to a yard, find an outdoor space. Plants in courtyards attract all kinds of interesting bugs, bees and butterflies to watch, and bubbles and sidewalk chalk are fun outdoor activities. Blowing bubbles has the built-in bonus that it requires deep breathing, a known stress reliever!

Dust off your green thumb

No matter where you live, a garden box, kitchen garden kit, outdoor planters or a few potted plants on the balcony can reduce stress and improve mood. Research shows that gardening is associated with reductions in anxiety and depression as well as increased life satisfaction. The process of planting has a therapeutic element to it, and caring for plants and watching them grow is a wonderful long-term project for kids. Consider planting flowers that attract butterflies or herbs and vegetables that can be used for cooking.

Bring art outside

We are conditioned to think of art as an inside activity, but coloring outside promotes relaxation. The combination of fresh air, sounds of the natural environment and the physical relief associated with putting crayons or markers to the page is powerful. When kids color, they get their feelings out while engaging in creative expression. When they color outside, they have the added benefit of the stress reducing properties of the natural world.

While “night walks” helped one exhausted mom calm her tired little ones in the evening, finding the outdoor activities that restore calm for your family can take some trial and error. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Sometimes bringing your inside activities outdoors is the first step toward spending more time outside the house.