

Play Matters

Playing with nature, mud & getting dirty



Briefing Sheet 5

PLAY

Who can remember being outdoors building dens, climbing trees, making perfumes from leaves and flowers or playing with mud, stones or water? Most of us have childhood memories of playing in fields, fishing for tadpoles, paddling in streams, or picking daisies. These types of childhood outdoor play experiences have been declining over time due to a range of factors including an increased reliance on technology, reduced free time, disappearing open space and perceived safety issues. Children today are therefore having much less contact with the natural world and this can have an impact on their healthy development.

Children are naturally exposed to the bacteria, germs and microbes around them. Babies will put their hands, feet, and every imaginable object in their mouths. Toddlers and older children love digging in dirt, picking up worms, jumping in muddy puddles or rolling on the ground. This natural behavior is likely designed to help children encounter germs and bacteria - subsequently training their immune systems to react to it accordingly.

We have however changed how we live and strive to eliminate as much as possible, exposure to bacteria and germs. Recent research has shown that this is detrimental for children's health, and that there is a direct link between a lacking of diverse microbes in a child's "gut" to potential chronic conditions such as asthma, allergies, obesity, diabetes, and even healthy brain development.¹

'Nature Deficit Disorder' whilst not a formal diagnosis, is a term used to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature, particularly for children in their developing years².

1 <http://time.com/4501169/five-dirty-habits-to-encourage-in-your-kid/>

2 *Natural Childhood*; Stephen Moss, *Natural Trust*

PLAYING WITH NATURE

Evidence suggests that time spent in the natural environment offers developmental, emotional and overall health benefits for children. There are numerous benefits ranging from increased creativity and problem solving skills, reduced stress and anxiety, and increased physical activity.

Children who spend time outdoors in natural environments can be:

- **Happier** – studies show fresh air, sunshine and increased activity levels all encourage good mood and reduce tendencies toward poor mental health.
- **Healthier** – being outdoors in the natural environment helps children to access fresh air and vitamin D; indoor air is usually less healthy.
- **Calmer** – exposure to nature and being outdoors can contribute to a healthy heart rate, and reduced muscle tension including the production of stress hormones.
- **More physically active** – children playing in natural environments can improve their motor fitness, coordination, balance, and agility.
- **Better vision** – being outdoors is good for eye health and time spent outdoors can help reduce short-sightedness in children.

Tips for Parents

Try to introduce some nature into your child's day:

- Take a walk through a local park or country park and talk about what you see – trees, birds, spiders' webs, flowers etc;
- Go on a scavenger hunt! Hunt for bugs or mini-beasts but don't disturb or hurt them, and make up stories;
- Have a teddy bears picnic;
- Roll down a grassy bank or hill, build a sandcastle, find some worms, climb a tree;
- Look at the stars, walk in the dark (an evening walk is a great way to settle babies and children);
- Pick some wild daisies or dandelions, make some perfume; and
- PLAY OUTSIDE.

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PLAYING WITH MUD

Did you know that playing with mud is beneficial for children? The physical properties of mud mean that it provides a rich tactile and sensory experience. Through playing with mud children can develop their fine motor skills, mathematical and scientific knowledge, and mud play is a great fun way to develop imagination and creativity too.

Muddy play is great fun; children can mould it, squish it, squelch and shape it. It can be made wetter or left to dry out. Digging in mud or splashing in muddy puddles can also be a great form of physical exercise. The open-ended nature of mud play is perfect for the developing brain. There is no end to the creations, ideas and games that children will invent with mud.

Tips for Parents

- Mud offers something for everyone regardless of a child's age, stage or ability;
- Play a game of making mud sculptures or mud pies;
- Add some leaves, twigs, pebbles and stones;
- Draw pictures in the mud with fingers or twigs;
- Add water – water and mud go hand-in-hand;
- Add buckets and spades, stones or shells; and
- GO OUTSIDE TO PLAY IN THE MUD.

Remember to wash hands thoroughly after playing with mud. It's a great idea to have old clothes, shoes and towels set aside for muddy play

GETTING DIRTY



Going back to our earlier childhood memories who can remember having scabby knees, torn holes in trousers from falling over or a not so perfect outfit? It seemed that we as children were allowed to play freely, make a mess and to get dirty!

Experts believe that our desire to keep everything sterile and clean is part to blame for recent increases in allergies amongst children as their immune systems are not being given the opportunity to develop naturally.

Just as a baby's brain needs stimulation and interaction to develop normally; the young immune system needs to be



strengthened by some exposure to everyday germs - helping children to become less susceptible to illnesses later in life. So consider letting your child's immune system harden, with the help of some dirt and germs and remember that evidence is showing that ultra clean lifestyles are actually bad for our health³.

Tips for Parents

- If you don't like messy play inside – take it outside - create a mud kitchen, or a digging area. Always keep family pets away from this area. Painting or crafting outside is lots of fun too;
- If it helps have a designated area for messy play (indoors or outdoors);
- Your child needs to feel confident and happy whilst playing and worrying about getting dirty or making a mess will impact on their playful experiences. Help your child to feel confident whilst playing by 'allowing' them to get dirty or to make a mess;
- Dress appropriately - decide which of your children's clothes are "good clothes" and which ones are "play/messy clothes";
- When in a natural environment, encourage your children to touch anything they want (within reason), including dirt, mud, trees, plants, insects, animals but not break flowers, trees or plants or, trample, destroy or frighten creatures.

Most children have an innate desire to get dirty, this should be nurtured as much as possible.

"There's no way that we can help children to learn to love and preserve this planet, if we don't give them direct experiences with the miracles and blessings of nature."

Anita Olds

3 *How keeping children too clean can wreck their immune systems, Daily Mail, 22 March 2012*