

Snapshots



RESEARCH REPORT

Take It Outside

Growing numbers of educators are finding that school time spent outdoors has benefits that go beyond leisure, a Usable Knowledge blog post from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) says, and it can help create happy, healthy children, schools, and communities.

The study examined educational experiences such as outdoor play-time and outdoor lessons both related and unrelated to nature. The impact? “Better physical health and wellness; increased environmental stewardship; enhanced creativity, concentration, and self-confidence; and

stronger collaboration and relationship skills,” the report says.

The report cites University of Colorado environmental psychologist Louise Chawla, who says frequent interaction with nature can reduce symptoms of attention-deficit disorder, improve memory, and lower rates of depression. Another study shows that outdoor time can actually reduce the incidence of nearsightedness in children.


HGSE alum Jessica Parsons, now an environmental program manager, says that outdoor time can help broaden children’s perspectives. Another HGSE alum, Ben Wild, now directs the Walkabout Education Foundation, which emphasizes self-sufficiency with weeklong backpacking trips. And in leading “unplugged” summer camp adventures, HGSE lecturer Sarah Leibel found that students developed strong conversational and interpersonal skills.

The National Park Service offers lesson plans and other resources to help children experience the great outdoors at www.nps.gov/teachers/index.htm.

But close-to-home experiences can benefit children and teens, too. Students who simply have the chance to explore an outdoor environment at recess learn to be creative within their surroundings, found master’s candidate Erica Fine, while getting the chance to exercise and appreciate even the most familiar features of the outdoors.

Based upon its work, HGSE suggests seven ways to integrate the outdoors into the school day:

1. **Designate a “wild” area of the schoolyard for children to explore.** Let the grass grow and animals make nests, and keep sticks and branches within reach of students. Encourage students to climb, discover, and play in the area.
2. **Create an outdoor classroom** where groups can meet to read, write, draw, or learn about the environment.
3. **Let students eat lunch and do physical education outside,** weather permitting.
4. **Foster partnerships between schools and local parks.** Visit parks for outdoor lessons and free play, and offer to let the town use school playgrounds on weekends. These partnerships can be especially important for urban and low-income students, who may have fewer opportunities to visit green spaces on their own.
5. **Take students for a walk** during the day to make observations about the environment, practice mindfulness, or complete a teamwork activity.
6. **Plan a field trip, on which students can experience nature without technology.** While immersive overnight programs can be transformational for students, they can also be expensive. Single-day adventures can be just as fun, with long-lasting benefits.
7. **Model the kind of engagement you want your students to have with nature.** Explore new developments on the playground, play with fallen leaves, and vocalize what you notice and love about the outdoors.

Try some of these strategies, and you may find that your students are better adjusted and ready to learn. For the full blog post by Leah Shafer and links to additional findings, visit www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/10/great-outdoors. 

Culturally Responsive Leadership

NAESP’s Diversity Task Force launched with the goal of identifying policies and practices proven effective in ensuring equity for all students in a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse society. NAESP has now compiled the task force’s initial findings in “The Principal’s Guide to Building Culturally Responsive Schools.”

The primer on transforming schools offers the following recommendations for advancing culturally responsive leadership:

1. **Conduct individual and buildingwide self-assessments.** Complete an inventory such as the Intercultural Development Inventory, and engage in “Who Am I?” exercises to help identify the cultural, philosophical, and social factors that create the context for individual belief systems.
2. **Create a positive climate and culture** by promoting inclusivity and positive relations among students, among teachers and staff, and among students and adults.
3. **Explore innovative ways to reach the community**—especially families—to tap into their strengths, keep them better informed, and involve them in creating and sustaining a positive climate and culture.

Other sections in the report are “Diversifying Student and Adult Capacity to Transform Schools,” “Utilizing Assets to Ensure Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning,” and “Developing Awareness and Leading the Charge to Provide Diverse Opportunities for All Students.” To download a copy, visit www.naesp.org/cultureguide.

