

*Discover Outdoors*

*The Decline of Outdoor Play  
and the Rise in Sensory Issues*



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*Discover Conferences*  
by Teach Preschool

## *Key Session Takeaways*

Children need more time spent outdoors and to move in all directions throughout the day!

Nature play is like cross-training using all types of muscles and moving in different ways

Being outdoors calms the brain and sets the foundation for learning

Exploring outdoors promotes sensory integration

## *Words of Wisdom from Angela*

### *Role of a Pediatric Occupational Therapist*

- Work with children on sensory integration
- Work on the occupation of the child
- Taking any activity/experience and evaluating it for its therapeutic potential

### *OT in the Outdoors*

- Experience Oriented
  - Using the Three Little Pigs story, children might reenact the story by building their own version of a house made of bricks, sticks and hay to re-tell the story
- Transformative – creating developmental change
- Inspires higher levels of play

### *Rise of Sensory & Motor Issues*

Children are showing decreased attention, fidgeting, decreased strength, poor posture (not enough core strength due to sitting/screen time, etc.), falling (spatial awareness is off), increased aggression (grabbing with more force, hitting harder when playing tag, etc.), rise in anxiety (and depression), not playing (less imaginary play), among others

- Children need to move more
  - Many adults reported being outdoors 4-6 hours/day during their childhood
  - Research shows kids today spend only 48 minutes of outdoor play each day
  - Research shows kids sit 9 hours per day on average in a seat

## *Developing the Vestibular system*

Helps with knowing where your body is in space, supporting all 6 eye muscles (for reading and writing), helps with attention, emotional regulation and activity regulation

- Kids need to move in vigorous ways (jump, spin, roll down a hill, swing in all directions, go upside down, climb trees, etc.)
  - Fluid in inner ear needs to move to stimulate hair cells and stimulate the vestibular sense
  - Vestibular sense is the unifying sense that helps with sensory integration
  - Treated in therapy by putting child on swings and moving them all directions to stimulate hair cells and help them know where their body is in space
- Supports all 6 eye muscles (important for reading and writing)
- Helps children pay attention
  - Schools use techniques such as mindfulness, Pilates, yoga, bouncing chairs, pedal bikes under chairs, dimming lights, etc. to help with inattention - a temporary fix that will not change the vestibular sense and does not work well for all children

## *Get Children Out in Nature*

Nature is the Ultimate Sensory Experience

- Engages multiple senses
  - Nature sounds, temperature, amount of space, etc.
- Creates a calm, alert state
  - Ideal for grounding and organizing the brain
  - Green, blues and browns found in nature are very calming colors and certain smells of trees help calm the brain
- Foundation for learning
- Nature creates rich sensory experiences that will create change in the child
  - Element of risk, varying sensations, challenging the muscles and senses on a higher level
- More opportunities for child-directed experiences
- Endless Opportunities to challenge the senses and encourage different play skills

### *Other Fun Facts*

- Bird sounds help with spatial awareness
  - Birds tweeting in all directions and you are orienting yourself to where sound is coming from
- Nature Play is like cross-training
  - Using all types of muscles in different ways
- Many kids are not tolerating being messy (i.e., messy hands)
  - Light touch can feel aversive - one way to relieve this is through deep pressure
  - A child who may not like the feeling of sap on their hand tolerates it because of the deep pressure while carrying a log
- Going barefoot provides great proprioceptive feedback, strengthens foot and ankle muscles

### *Other Helpful Ways to Support Sensory Integration at Home or School*

- Using Loose Parts
  - Variety of materials used in many ways and for many purposes
  - Promotes a higher level of play
- Building materials area
  - Using big loose parts in an outdoor space will engage the senses and muscles in different ways
  - Heavy lifting helps children regulate force
  - Picking up heavy things to build a fort, build with logs, etc.



## *Put it Into Practice*

One of the best ways to support sensory integration at home or school is through getting kids outside! In particular, using large loose parts for outdoor play and exploration. Set up a building materials area with a variety of large loose parts in an outdoor space that can be lifted, transported, and manipulated. Spending time outdoors with ample opportunities for heavy lifting will engage various muscles and movements needed to help regulate force while also igniting the senses. Will your child/ren build a fort? A castle? A boat? The possibilities are endless and the benefits are far reaching!

## Quiz Questions

### Outdoorsy Art!

1. **Which of the following are ways to develop the vestibular system?**
  - a. Swinging
  - b. Jumping
  - c. Rolling down a hill
  - d. All of the above
  
2. **True or False: Bird sounds in nature help with spatial awareness as children have to orient themselves to where the sounds are coming from.**
  
3. **Today, on average children spend how much time playing outdoors?**
  - a. 10 hours
  - b. 7 hours
  - c. 48 minutes
  - d. None of the above
  
4. **True or False: With a rise in sensory issues, children need less time spent outdoors and more time spent sitting on a bouncy chair in an academic setting.**
  
5. **True or False: Occupational therapy can only be done in an indoor setting.**