



The Wellness Family

Dr. Heather Keeps You Informed

Outdoor Play

Thirty years ago the life of the average child was completely different. Many moms didn't work, and spent their days cleaning house and caring for their families. It wasn't uncommon to hear "Go outside and play" echoing through the neighborhood as moms wanted to mop without footprints being left behind. There were no video games and the typical TV had 3 channels. Then it all changed and not for the better.

What Happened?

Parents in their late 30's and early 40's probably remember (with some nostalgia) Saturday morning cartoons and going to the arcade. It wasn't until the early 80's that the first popular video game consoles were released and cable TV with cartoon channels became the norm. Suddenly, instead of just a few hours at the arcade and a couple of hours once a week watching cartoons, children had screen distractions available for multiple hours a day as opposed to just a few hours a week.

A recent study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that (in a sample representing four million U.S. children) nearly half of preschoolers didn't have the opportunity for parent-supervised outdoor play each day. A similar study by the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit advocacy group, revealed that, "Compared to the 1970s, children now spend 50% less time in unstructured outdoor activities. Children ages 10 to 16 now spend, on average, only 12.6 minutes per day in vigorous physical activity. Yet they spend an average of 10.4 waking hours each day relatively motionless."

A study in 2005 reported that the average child spends 44 hours per week staring at some kind of electronic screen. That is over 6 hours per day. However, a more recent study in 2013, actually said it's more like 7 hours a day (that's almost 50 hours per week).

Health Risks

This isn't news; increased screen time has become the norm for this generation of children. What might be news is the actual health risk involved. For instance, childhood obesity in pre-adolescents has more than doubled in the past 20 years and the rate of clinically obese adolescents has tripled. Additionally, recent studies have shown there may be a link between this decreased outdoor play and increased Ritalin and antidepressant prescriptions. Other studies have shown that children exposed to natural or outdoor settings receive benefits to their cognitive health, such as a reduction in ADHD symptoms.

It seems logical that this lack of outdoor play would cause lower vitamin D levels and result in the expected related health issues; however, studies are showing this increased screen time is actually causing near-sightedness and other ophthalmic-related issues.

Health Benefits

Many of the benefits are going to be obvious; such as: fresh air, more exercise, lower risk of obesity, opportunities to exercise imagination and increased social interaction. However, recent studies have actually suggested less obvious benefits. For instance, according to an Australian group, children who spend more time in outdoor sports and less time watching TV have better retinal micro-vascular structure, which apparently indicates all kinds of things about one's



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circulation in general. In addition, Dutch researchers have found that kids with ADHD function better when in the woods than in a built environment. An additional study showed that environmental education offered in schools helped students increase their critical thinking skills. Clearly, less structured playtime outdoors is going to be beneficial.

Making the Change

The first step is the easiest: decrease screen time. Once the time allowed in front of a screen is limited then children will have to find something else to do with their time. One of the easiest ways to affect this change is to have children "buy" their screen time. For every hour spent in physical activity, they've earned an hour of screen time. This will quickly and effectively cut the amount of time spent plugged in to a computer or other electronic device in half.

Another important part of making this change will be finding ways to engage and entertain children. Before the advent of so much technology, children inherently knew what to do when told to "Go outside and play." Games of tag, hide-and-seek or stick-ball with the neighbor kids were easy enough to get going, but that's just not the case for today's youth.

When sending children out to play be sure to provide some ideas of things they can do, or it won't be surprising to find them just sitting outside looking bored. A quick Google search of "outdoor summer activities" or "activities for children to do outside" will provide many ideas.

For the Children

Sidewalk chalk is easy to find and inexpensive but extremely useful for outside play. Not only do children love to draw on the driveway or the back patio but spraying it away in a rainbow of colors with the water hose is as much fun. However, that's just the beginning. For the younger children, this is an easy way to help them learn to read. Draw big letters on the driveway, such as: C, H, L, S, etc. The game can begin simple enough, call out the letter and the child runs to that letter. Eventually when that stops being challenging, activities can be associated with each letter. Clap on the letter C, hop on the letter H, laugh on the letter L, and so on.

Another fun game for outdoor play is to take an old sheet, place it on the lawn, and give the children some paint. It might be wise to nail it into the grass with some tent spikes (all the way down so there's no risk of injury). The children can paint with brushes, with their fingers, or even their toes. The finished product can be hung up in the garage, or on an outside wall of the house or even used as a backdrop for some fun summer pictures.

Remember the days of duck-duck-goose and freeze tag? Many kids today don't know how to play independently. They've spent most of their formative years being entertained by TV and video games. Take them outside and teach them games. Give them a little taste of what childhood used to be like. Just like plants need fresh air and sunshine: so do children.

For the Family

Outdoor activities for the family can be as elaborate as a treasure hunt and making bird feeders or as simple as a game of catch; but there are tons of things in between. The important thing is to start by going outside.

Family time outside doesn't have to be extreme or rough and tumble sports activities. There are a lot of fun things that can be done with little effort but a lot of reward. If there is a lake or other body of water nearby, go skip stones for an hour. Is there a wooded area or small forest nearby? Go

bird watching and discuss nature. Children love to learn about the world around them, talk about how trees make the oxygen we breathe. For older children, it's even okay to discuss photosynthesis and chlorophyll. Speaking of trees, contact a local Chamber of Commerce and look into opportunities to plant a tree this summer.

A camera is a great tool around which to build a family activity. Whether it's a digital camera or a cell phone, each member of the family individually takes pictures while walking around exploring the yard or a nearby park. This is a really fun activity on a hiking or walking trail. The point is to take pictures (close up or far away) and at the end of the day download the pictures. They can be put on a laptop or loaded on an SD card or digital picture frame. The fun part is sitting together and guessing what is actually in the pictures. This combines outdoor play time and family togetherness.

For Seniors

Everyone benefits from outdoor play and this includes elderly family members. Outdoor craft shows or flea markets can be a great way to spend the day, and many communities offer outdoor theaters or botanical gardens. Anything that can be enjoyed while on a slow leisurely stroll is sure to be appreciated.

A fun idea may be to invest in a metal detector; this is a unique outdoor elderly activity that can also be done with the grandkids. Metal detectors can be ordered online for around \$50 and can be taken to beaches, parks and other public places. It's amazing what's out there.

One final idea might be to get everything together and go fishing! It's an activity that isn't as popular as it used to be but chances are that granddad isn't going to say, "No."

In Summary

We are living in a sedentary society and our children are the worse for it. Less screen time should automatically result in more activity, it may take time but it's worth the investment.



Dear Patient,
Dr. Heather is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. So take a moment today to discuss with your Family Wellness Chiropractor any concerns you may have regarding your family's overall health and wellness.

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