



scribbles

Diagnosis: Nature-Deficit Disorder

Treatment: Outdoor Play

Prognosis: Excellent

As early childhood educators, we know that unstructured, active, outdoor play is essential for the well being of each child. We've witnessed the myriad of positive influences it has on all aspects of development; how it helps to reduce stress, develop impulse control, build social skills, enhance gross motor coordination, assist with weight control, promote language skills, encourage curiosity, etc. It has been no surprise to us to read about the strong positive impact it has on academic achievement, leading to higher test scores in reading, math, and science, or how play has been scientifically proven to create "new neural networks". We've also learned how it develops "executive function," the ability to self-navigate, a skill considered necessary in today's world.

We commend journalist Richard Louv, author of the book, *"Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder."* His ten year study of experiences with nature and outdoor play determined that play cannot be considered an extra-curricular activity. Even immune systems are strengthened after contact with nature!

Perhaps this is why news about school districts changing outdoor play to highly structured, competitive play, or eliminating recess altogether, has been so disheartening to us. Imaginative, unstructured play is being replaced with academics, alienating children from the natural world. Is it any surprise that we have more issues concerning teasing, bullying, and obesity, or that some school districts have found the need to hire "recess coaches," to help children learn how to play constructively again?

What have we learned from all this? Outdoor play is of paramount importance for children of all ages. We're grateful to live in an area that provides so much variety regarding nature experiences. We love the fact that we can go on nature walks and field trips, examine pond life, farms, experience the beaches and lakes, and study plant and animal life. We appreciate having a safe outdoor playground in a beautiful setting.

Let's keep in mind the words of renowned educator Rae Pica: "Play is a brilliant neurological exercise."

Have fun playing!

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