

## ***Rediscovering the great outdoors***

In recent years, the rise in mental health incidents has become a cause for alarm. Worldwide trends are emerging where more people are being treated and diagnosed with mental health disorders than ever before. While debates rage around what influences technology, social media, parenting styles and economic status (to name a few on a very large list) have on people's mental health, parents are often left wondering what action should or could they take now to prevent their children from becoming one of the statistics. Sitting about and waiting for someone to find the answer is probably not the best course of action. Research rarely produces quick answers, and nor should it. However, the problem with sitting idle while waiting for answers means that more and more children (and adults) are at risk of being affected by poor mental health. As such, this article aims to explore one possible course of action parents could consider taking in the interim.

### ***Research versus what we already know***

It appears society's view has become, at times, clouded by the belief that research is the pinnacle of future mental health directives. While there is no argument that knowledge is a powerful tool that improves and better informs society, it can, on occasions, act like doctrine that ignores historical facts that have and continue to support positive mental health. Thankfully, trends are starting to emerge whereby many, including researchers, are starting to re-examine their understanding of human development and how exposure to experiences such as physical activity can positively impact mental health and overall wellbeing.

### ***What has exercise got to do with it?***

For decades, theorists have been fascinated by human development, particularly that of small children. All typically developing children follow a similar path in the way they develop socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically. Research also supports the idea that none of these skills exist independently of each other, meaning that social, emotional, language, cognitive and physical capabilities are all interconnected and are equally reliant on each other to mature to their fullest potential.

A quick conversation with anyone from a previous generation will regale listeners with tales of tree climbing, street roaming, dam building, bike riding, hole digging fun. Driven by natural curiosity and a shared sense of adventure and exploration, children of previous generations were presented with one of the most amazing gifts – they were able to fine tune a range of fundamental skills without even knowing it. To elaborate, let us look at an example. Children who found a small body of water and set about building a dam in the middle of it did not realise that they were honing their problem solving and higher order thinking skills, refining their fine and gross motor skills and using their social skills when they worked alongside their peers to achieve an end goal. When their explorations or experiments did not turn out as they wished, children would persist until satisfied, completely unaware that they were incidentally strengthening their resilience levels and learning how to regulate their emotions – two things which are imperative to maintaining positive mental health. Yet while nothing has changed regarding what children need to become healthy, happy and skilled individuals, the environments which they are raised have, thus meaning that suburbs that once nurtured healthy minds are fewer and further between.

### ***The stay at home sedentary jungle***

Discarding current coronavirus conditions that are keeping children cooped up indoors, there is no denying that children were already facing a pandemic of their own – often being exposed to environments that are deficit of physical opportunities and stimulation. House plots and, consequently, back yards are shrinking in size, children are not free to roam due to the need for 24/7 supervision, and the lure of technology frequently draws children indoors rather than outdoors. Combined, these factors have been mounting together, starving children of the conditions they need to reach their full potential long before the virus hit.

Neuroscience advancements have identified direct correlations between physical inactivity and those of poor executive functioning. Without experiences that develop a range of skills and abilities, children can fail to develop in typical ways. Yet the consequences for an increased sedentary lifestyle does not end there.

Over the last decade, increased attention is being paid to the concept of mind, body connection. Gone are the days where this type of concept was only embraced by those seeking a holistic lifestyle. Instead, scientific data is now supporting the idea that active bodies not only promote physical health but also positive mental health. So what does this discovery mean for our children?

One common language shared by children across the globe is play. When children make up their own games they flex their social skills and learn from their successes and mistakes. Furthermore, the natural consequence of play means that children learn how to cope with the unexpected, rally their spirits when something disappoints them, and persist even when the odds are not always in their favour. Unsurprisingly, these are the types of attributes that elevate children towards successful careers and relationships later in life.

Combining the benefits referred to here and with those previously mentioned helps highlight that our need for physical activity is not outdated. Instead, the opposite is true. In order to achieve good mental health, physical skills need to be mastered and nurtured as much as ever. Yet the question remains, how do parents support this need when the space and great outdoors is no longer tapping on their children's doorsteps. The final section of this article hopes to discover a few ideas.

### ***Bringing the physical world to children***

In an ideal world it would be nice to find open plains and wilderness for children to explore. Yet the truth is that many children will not have easy and regular access to such environments. As such, it is going to be up to adults to provide the right type of conditions that support children's development across all domains.

While those who market toys and activities will try to convince consumers that the only right way is to buy toys and equipment specifically designed to target children's development, these types of toys lack one fundamental ingredient – creativity. When children use store bought products their imaginations are immediately limited, confined to thinking about using the product in the way it was intended.

Opposite to store bought products are the things that can be found in our everyday environments. Sticks can become drum sticks, walls around a sandcastle, broomsticks, swords, pretend campfires, homes for insects, or craft materials which can be used when gluing or playing with playdough. The possibilities are endless. When children learn to discover these endless possibilities they build their curiosity and desire to play and, inadvertently, develop all of the skills previously mentioned that help combat poor mental health.

Granting children the freedom to climb and move indoors can be met with some adult resistance – mainly because the traditional belief is that big, bold movements such as running and jumping are for outside only. Yet there is a rub with this belief – children no longer have access to the outdoors like they used to. With this in mind, letting children build cubby houses and nests out of furniture can provide a simulated outdoor experience. Instead of dragging logs and wood into place (something which encourages a combination of fine and gross motor development) children can drag furniture together. Instead of finding branches with thick leaf foliage for cubby roofs they can raid the linen cupboard and make a covering that way. The bonus is that once the cubby is built the learning and developmental opportunities do not stop there. Instead, the building of the cubby is but the first step. The play that evolves inside the cubby provides additional opportunities which include children coming up with their own role play narratives and ideas.

Clay and playdough not only give children the chance to build strength in their hands but also replicate the type of play they might engage in if they were exploring the banks of a muddy riverbed. Conversations that

come out of these types of experiences help develop language skills and fine tune their understanding of social conventions. Naturally, the benefits are not limited to those mentioned here.

While a bath is no substitute for a dam or stream to play in, it still provides just as many great opportunities for exploring and learning. Putting in cups, saucers and (if you are feeling adventurous) sticks into the bathwater provides opportunities for children to increase creativity levels, learn about volume, measuring, mathematical and scientific language, and engage their problem solving capabilities. It may seem counterproductive to add materials like sticks to bathwater, but it is important to remember that the goal is not cleanliness - it is development and positive mental health. When we build such important connections we are essentially building endless neural pathways, some of which will help children later in life to maintain a positive mindset, even when things get challenging.

### ***Physical development and mental health in a nutshell***

Mental health disorders are on the rise. While there are no definitive answers as to what factors negatively impact mental health, a lack of physical opportunities is one possibility that is being explored in this article. Developments in neuroscience have meant research can identify that physical activity has a positive effect on overall health and development. Sedentary lifestyles influenced by technologies, decreasing yard sizes, and limited outdoor play spaces mean that children no longer have opportunities like previous generations to enhance skills across all of the developmental domains. As such, the answer to promoting health and wellbeing could lie in increasing the amount of movement experiences children have access to. Despite living in environments where physical play is more limited, creative solutions exist. Such solutions include providing simulated experiences such as cubby house building or using outdoor materials inside. Regardless of the methods used, adults can use their own creativity to set their children up, thus helping them to build an array of neural pathways that they can use now and in the future to sustain positive mental health.

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