Pandemic provides an opportunity to increase outdoor activity
This spring while we were in lockdown and mostly staying at home other than to purchase groceries, my husband and I found ourselves turning toward walks outside in our neighbourhood and the incredible Edmonton river valley park system as a means to get out of the house and break the monotony. As the spring rolled into summer, I noticed that as the weather warmed up, there were many people, adults and children alike, out and about, taking a break from working at home and emergency remote teaching. In fact, for me, like many of my neighbours, I suspect the only break we had from the lockdown was our daily exposure to the outdoors. Socially distanced walks became normal, as did outdoor barbecues and camping trips.

In addition to more people wandering around the neighbourhood, COVID puppies, kittens and other pets were in high demand during the lockdown. We got to see many of these new additions walking around with their new families. The pandemic provided so many more opportunities to visit with your neighbours and their kids across the fence last spring. It was fun to watch their children run back and forth in the yard playing games and imagining new adventures every day.

Finally, being in lockdown meant that I had my garden fully planted well before the May long weekend, possibly for the first time ever. I thoroughly enjoyed watching my tulips burst through the soil as it warmed up enough to support the growing bulbs.

In reflecting on life during a pandemic, one common thread runs through many of my experiences: the natural world. I would often think to myself how grateful I was for a connection to the outdoors and the natural world. Without it, the spring would have been much more limited and, in some cases, severed. “The gap between natural settings, to which our physiological functions are best adapted, and the highly urbanized and artificial environment that we inhabit is a contributing cause of the ‘stress state’ in modern people,” they write.

Alleviating the stress of living inside all the time can be as simple as taking a walk outside or visiting a park. Scientists around the world have studied the effect of nature on our physiological and mental well-being. In 2016, the CBC reported on one experiment where 18,500 people engaged with nature once a day for a month. The CBC reported that the study found that for the participants, there was a significantly increase in people’s health, happiness, connection to nature and active nature behaviours, such as feeding the birds and planting flowers for bees — not just throughout the challenge, but sustained for months after the challenge had been completed. In other words, the effect of nature was not short-lived; it had an enduring effect.

For children during COVID-19, the need to be outdoors is clear. In 2020, the CBC wrote about a national study that found "prior to the pandemic, about 15 per cent of kids met Canada's 24-hour guidelines for physical activity, sedentary time and sleep" but that "movement levels had plunged as low as three per cent during the early days of the restrictions." On its website for parents and children, the American Academy of Pediatrics notes the benefits of getting outside regularly. The benefits include children being physically healthier because they play harder outside than inside; playing outside encourages curiosity, creativity and improved learning outcomes; children who spend time in natural settings tend to have less anger and aggression and better impulse control; and finally, mental health improves when children have spent time in nature.

Lisa Everitt
Editor, The Learning Team

In the article “Physiological Effects of Nature Therapy: A Review of the Research in Japan,” authors Chorong Song, Harumi Ikei and Yoshifumi Miyazaki note that “Humans have evolved into what they are today after the passage of six to seven million years. If we define the beginning of urbanization as the rise of the industrial revolution, less than 0.01 per cent of our species’ history has been spent in modern surroundings.” Their statement helps us understand the well-established connection between our mental and physical health and nature. If we pause a moment to think about the implication of this insight, we realize that the evolution of human beings has occurred mostly outside in the natural world. It would suggest that our genetic makeup has evolved hand in hand with the natural world.

Since our modern surroundings are, for the majority of people, found in urban settings, our connection to the natural world has been more limited and, in some cases, severed. “The gap between natural settings, to which our physiological functions are best adapted, and the highly urbanized and artificial environment that we inhabit is a contributing cause of the ‘stress state’ in modern people,” they write.

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Learning outside brings great benefits

Court Rustemeyer
ATA Global, Environmental & Outdoor Education Council

Not ever before has our world seen a roadblock like the one facing us today. As teachers, we were thrown into the fire to teach online for the first time in our careers, then in-person with strict guidelines, both online and now back to face-to-face with our students. Teachers’ demonstrated ability to have flexible lesson plans, ideas and teaching visions has been so inspirational that it might just change the way we teach for good. Who would have thought that a pandemic would force people to realize that being active outdoors is the safer approach of all?

"When you’re outside, fresh air is constantly renewed during the day," says Lisa Everitt, Editor of The Learning Team. "This means that the ventilation is more complete and the risk of respiratory droplets containing the virus that causes COVID-19 to become infected," the website states. As the public health emergency was declared over, discussions then turned to how to resume more normal activities, such as students returning to public schools, which included the notion of classes being held outside. It is tempting to think that outdoor schools were a new creation, but in Western society, the idea of outdoor classes was first established in the early part of the 20th century during tuberculosis outbreaks.

"Standing in their backyards, or perhaps a challenge for them to do after school hours," states the Mayo Clinic website. "Parents, you as well can help balance the online workload that your kids are seeing taking life in stride. Everyone is doing their best, and if we can all learn to accept and support the idea that the "normal" way of teaching is evolving, the better we all can be at making sure that our kids and students are successful.

"I know I am certainly hoping that learning outdoors becomes the new normal when all the dust has settled. So take the chance and risk by allowing this learning to take place outdoors in a new environment. By inspiring youth to head outdoors more, you might just build some advocacy for nature for life, and we could all use more of that."

Court Rustemeyer is president of the ATAs Global, Environmental & Outdoor Education Council.

Outdoor school – not just a 2020 idea

Lisa Everitt
Editor, The Learning Team

When COVID-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic early in 2020, health officials provided direction to people about how to stay safe during the pandemic to prevent the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. They encouraged social distancing measures to limit the spread of the virus, and websites like that of the Mayo Clinic (2020) explained that mirrors the idea of outdoor classes. As in-person classroom settings were first established in the early part of the 20th century during tuberculosis outbreaks.

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Court Rustemeyer is president of the ATAs Global, Environmental & Outdoor Education Council.

References


Check these out

for resources, lists of potential outdoor activities, recommended books and lessons, plus much more.

Recommended websites

- Childhood by Nature: https://childhoodbynature.com
- GEOEC: www.geoec.org
- Ever Active Schools: https://everactive.org
- Get Outside and Play: https://getoutsideandplay.ca
- Megan Zeni Blog: https://meganzeni.com
- Outdoor Play Canada: www.outdoorplaycanada.ca
- Mass Audubon Nature Bingo: www.massaudubon.org
- Healing Forest: https://healingforest.org; Nature Connection Activities to Encourage Mindfulness: https://healingforest.org/2017/03/10/nature-connection-activities/
- Geocaching: www.geocaching.com
- Be Fit For Life Network, Orange Marks the Spot: http://befitforlife.ca/resources/orangemarksthespot

Recommended books

- The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats (1962)
- Unplugged by Steve Antony (2017)
- Not a Box (2006) and Not a Stick (2007) by Antoinette Portis

WEBSITES

Go for regular walks, bike rides or runs as a family. Many urban communities have trails and bike paths through parks, riverways or lakefronts.

Create an outdoor scavenger hunt where your kids collect items from nature.

Photograph nature. Let our kids borrow your phone camera and see how many different types of wildlife they can find and photograph.

Have a bonfire. Make sure you practice good fire safety habits and supervise all campfire activities. This is a great way to bond with your family, create memories and enjoy the outdoors.

Source: https://www.superhealthykids.com

WINTER BINGO!

B Activities you can do with a BUCKET

SNOW CASTLES Gather buckets large and small and build away
ICE ART Add water, food colouring or other objects then freeze

I Activities you can try on the ICE

BROOMBALL All you need are 2 teams, a soccer ball and a broom for each player
SLIDING MAZE Shovel a maze out of the snow, or build one with hockey sticks

N Activities you can do with NO Snow

WINTER HOPSCOTCH Grab your chalk and remember to include a snow dance square
SHOVEL HURDLES You can still use the shovels, prop them up for more challenge

G Have fun and stay safe with a GROUP

SLEDD TRAIN Get some rope, work as a team and find some speed
SNOW LINE TAG First you walk out a maze in the snow, then use it for line tag

O Have fun and stay safe on your OWN

SNOW LONG JUMP After a fresh snowfall, take the chance to challenge your skills
MINI QUINZEE Build a small mound of snow, let it set, then dig out the middle

BOOKS

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