Children's Mental feath and Wellbeing

ewilding

lay

"Mature is a tool to get children to experience not just the wider world, but themselves."

~ Stephen Moss -

According to a 2019 Danish study, children who grow up with greener surroundings have up to 55% less risk of developing mental health issues later in life.

There is considerable evidence to indicate that time spent outdoors and in nature increases life expectancy, improves wellbeing, reduces symptoms of depression and increases a child's ability to achieve and learn in school.

According to the Open University's OPENspace Research Centre, teachers also report improved concentration, better ability to focus and learn, increased productivity, better behaviour, and the fostering of more positive relationships between adults and children and amongst peer groups, when children are more active and spend more time outside during the day.

Read on for further information about how children's mental health and wellbeing can be supported through connecting with our beautiful planet.



"Our challenge isn't so much to teach children about the natural world, but to find ways to sustain the instinctive connections they already carry - Terry Krantwurst -

- Attachment and Connection

Attachment theory has become a mainstay of Early Years research and pedagogy for a long time. Attachment theory helps to explain the relationship between a child and their primary caregivers.

ove builds brains!

Attachment is the biological need for relationships that all human beings are born with. It is especially important in the early years of life because it shapes how our brains and bodies handle emotions.

Babies are born with brains programmed to seek emotional and physical connections with people. Over the first year, they discover who, in their world, is there for us when we need them and who is not in tune with our needs. A baby's rapidly developing brain keeps track of these patterns and, as they develop, they build them into their expectations about relationships in general.

The nature of these early experiences directly influence how a child develops throughout the course of their lifetime, both physically and mentally. This, in turn, will affect a child's capacity to make friends, to explore the world around them and to engage with learning. However, it is not only through human relationships that children can create attachments.

Research evidence shows that children also build attachment relationships to a place and that nature plays a role in shaping those place attachments. While place attachment is still relatively under-theorised compared to human attachment, both forms of attachment focus on the strength and positive relationship between a child and something external, a caregiver, or a place in the physical environment.

Secure human and place attachment exhibits itself in a similar way: children venture away from the object of attachment only to return in times of stress. Secure human attachments support and predict the quality of future relationships. They also foster resilience in children and equip them to be able to respond to and cope with stress.

Secure place attachments are linked to the presence of nature, social bonding, and emotional and cognitive processes. There is also emergent resilience research with children which suggests that nature can play an important role in fostering resilience, leading researchers to suggest that nature may be an essential aspect of secure place attachments and resilience.





Keeping Movement in Mind -

There is a huge amount of evidence that sitting still for hours at a time is detrimental to a child's learning and development. "**Children think better on their feet than on their seat.**" said Mark Benden in an interview in the Times Educational Supplement. In fact, movement in babies and young children is essential to build the neural pathways for learning that will benefit them later in life.

From the moment of birth, children have an inbuilt urge to move. The first 12 months of life are focused on learning how to stand upright and then to be able to walk. When we look at the tiny feet of a 12-month baby, and how large their head is in comparison, it is nothing short of miraculous that babies learn to balance and to walk.

Every healthy child has an irrepressible need to move from the moment they are born. All of this early childhood movement is essential in building a sensory "map" in the child's brain of where they are in space at any particular time. Crawling, rolling, rocking, standing, rocking on a rocking horse, spinning, twirling, swinging and rolling down hills are all activities most children love, and will repeat over and over again. This repetition helps to build up a store of information that a child's brain needs for healthy development. By the age of 5-6 years old, young children have enough information and experience stored in their brains to enable them to run, jump, hop, skip at will and, believe it or not, also to be able to sit still and listen. That early development of the ability to keep our heads still and upright actually supports concentration and listening skills - ready for the learning that the school years will bring.

It is so easy to want to help babies and young children as they explore their bodies and movement but remember that the struggle is part of the development process. There is a difference between being ready to catch them if they fall, and doing things for them. Be careful not to 'over-support' and, as a result, restrict the natural movement of the baby. This can inhibit the formation of pathways in the brain, which will later be used for learning.



- The Amazing Magic of Nature -

In the early 1980s, a Harvard University biologist named Edward O. Wilson proposed a theory called biophilia which suggested that humans are instinctively drawn towards natural surroundings. Most studies agree that children who play outside are smarter, happier, more attentive, and less anxious. While it's unclear how exactly the cognitive function and mood improvements occur, there are a number of things we do know about why nature is good for children's minds.

- **Building Confidence**: Nature play has a lot less structure than the majority of indoor play and children will interact with outdoor environments in endless and imaginative ways. Having the freedom and control of how they interact with nature builds confidence in even the shyest of children.
- **Creativity and imagination:** Unstructured outdoor play allows children to interact meaningfully with their environment, think freely, design their own activities, and problem solve in creative and inventive ways.
- **Responsibility:** Understanding that nature is alive and that living things will die if not taken care of properly is an essential step for young children in understanding the world. Trusting children to take care of nature means they will quickly learn what happens if they mistreat it.
- Lowering stress and fatigue: Research indicates that urban environments require what's called directed attention, which forces us to ignore distractions and exhausts our brains. In natural environments, we practice a very different, more effortless type of attention known as soft fascination that creates feelings of pleasure, not fatigue. How delightful!

- Activate the senses: Nature activates more senses than any form of screen-time. You can see, hear, smell, and touch nature and build up your sensory knowledge in multiple ways. This does wonders for brain development.
- Movement: Almost all ways of interacting with nature involve more exercise than sitting on a couch. Children don't need to be solidly engaged in some kind of sport a walk or skip through a park or field will get the adrenalin moving and the blood pumping. Exercise is not only good for children's bodies, studies suggest in helps to make children more focused which is especially beneficial for children who are neurodivergent.
- Awe and Wonder: Nature creates a unique sense of wonder for children that no other environment can provide. The incredible magic of nature's processes that happen on a daily basis in parks, fields, gardens can trigger amazing questions and thinking from children. Curiosity and questioning are an essential part of building healthy minds and, by interacting and asking questions about the earth and the life it supports, children will, in turn, become good stewards of the planet

Rewilding Early Years

Mature and children are natural playmates; they're both wild and messy, unpredictable and beautiful.

-Mark Hoeferhoff -