

Don't Overthink Outdoor Play

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

It's finally summer, time to enjoy the great outdoors, but how do we get kids outdoors when there are so many distractions? As adults we recognize the therapeutic quality of unstructured time spent in nature but that's not a convincing argument to a kid on summer break who would rather be playing video games.

This summer, make outdoor time a deliberate habit that the whole family shares. You are never too young or old to enjoy a sunny summer day. You can plan a family activity or spend the time separately, but it's easier to create new habits when you lead by example.

Planning family hikes, yard improvement projects and other exciting activities is a great way to start and to get kids interested in being outdoors. However, time for unstructured play is important too. Unstructured outdoor play is what really gives kids the brain break they need during their time off from school. It helps them create a personal connection with nature and the outdoors.

Give them space, and a little freedom to get messy, and watch their imagination take over. Don't overwhelm the space with toys and play equipment, outdoor adventures don't require much for supplies but things like buckets, old pots and pans, binoculars, etc. can encourage creativity and help get the party started.

Remember that the qualities we appreciate in a well-maintained landscape are often the opposite of what kids find inviting. Try to imagine yourself, as a kid, pretending you're exploring the jungle or homesteading in the woods within the weed-free, carefully mulched garden that we adults are so proud of. Choose a space in the side or backyard just for them. Let it be a little wild, let them dig holes, leave a few weeds.

If your jungle explorer is reluctant to start their safari, try taking familiar activities outdoors. Encourage them to read and play dress-up on the porch or take the coloring books and play-doh out to a picnic table. Taking an activity they already enjoy and simply moving it outside gets their feet out the door and before long they will find new interests in the world around them.

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