

THE UNSAFE CHILD: Less Outdoor Play is Causing More Harm than Good by Angela

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About the Author

Angela Hanscom is a pediatric occupational therapist and the founder of TimberNook, which focuses on nature-centered developmental programming in New England. Angela holds a master's degree in occupational therapy and an undergraduate degree in Kinesiology (the study of movement) with a concentration in health fitness. She specializes in vestibular (balance) treatment and sensory integration. She is also the author of the upcoming non-fiction book, *Balanced & Barefoot*, which discusses the effects of restricted movement and lack of outdoor playtime on overall sensory development in children.

The third grade classroom that was visiting our nature center for the day consisted of mostly boys—rowdy, loud and rambunctious boys. As we started out into the woods, the children spoke loudly to each other in anticipation of what was to come. After playing a quick game and explaining the ground rules, it was time for free play. As soon as the children realized they had the freedom to explore and build in the woods, something funny happened – they got really quiet. They dispersed and many of them started working together to build a large teepee.

Nothing gives me more pleasure than to see children contentedly building a structure using branches and logs out in the woodland. That is, until fear kicked in and everyone's pulse increased a few notches at the shrill cry of alarm.

“Put the sticks DOWN!” I looked over to see a chaperone running frantically towards the children. “Danger! Danger!” she screamed. Momentarily astonished by the sudden state of perceived emergency, I finally found my voice. “It's okay,” I yelled over to her. “I said they could use the sticks as long as they respect each other's personal space.” Speechless, the chaperone frowned, turned and walked to a group of nearby chaperones. I could have stopped the kids from building at this point, given into the fear and encouraged them to do something that our society would consider a little less risky. However, I decided to let the kids proceed with their project.

The children, with the help of a few excited adults, proceeded to build a massive stick teepee. “Look at what we built!” one of the boys said proudly, showing off their work.

“Can you believe it?” another child asked excitedly.

During this time of construction, ironically, no child got hurt—not even a scratch. This is rare. Children usually get some bumps and bruises while playing in the woods. Getting scrapes, bruises, and even scars was like a rite of passage when I was growing up. No cuts, no scrapes, nothing on this day.

It was as if Mother Nature herself was trying to prove the fearful chaperone wrong, to show that children are capable of more than we often allow.

As a parent of two girls, on some level, I can empathize with that chaperone’s fear. Parental instincts often naturally take over and we shout, “be careful” or “slow down” as we watch a child manipulate their natural environment. This is fairly normal and common. However, as a pediatric occupational therapist that spends countless hours observing children play in a natural environment, I also know that restricting children’s movement and limiting their ability to play outdoors can cause more harm than good.

As we continue to decrease children’s time and space to move and play outdoors, we are seeing a simultaneous rise in the number of children that are presenting with sensory deficits. The number of children that now need occupational therapy services to treat their sensory systems is on the rise. According to the New York Times, New York City public schools have seen a 30 percent increase in the number of students being referred to occupational therapy in the past four years. And they aren’t the only city seeing the surge of children in need of services. Chicago is up 20 percent in the past three years and Los Angeles jumped to a whopping 30 percent increase in the past five years.

Secondary to restricted movement and less time outdoors on a regular basis, more and more children are walking around with underdeveloped vestibular (balance) systems. In other words, they have decreased body awareness and sense of space. Teachers are reporting that children are falling out of their seats in school, running into one another, pushing with more force during games of tag, and are generally clumsier than in years past. In fact, the more we restrict and coddle our children, the more unsafe they become.

A child’s neurological system is naturally designed to seek out the sensory input it needs in order to develop into a strong and capable individual. For instance, if a child starts jumping on small rocks, that is because their brain is ready for this type of activity. If a child is spinning in circles just for fun, it is because he or she needs that sensory input. If they climb a tree effortlessly, it means they are capable of doing so.

It is only when adults consistently step in and say, “no” to everything physical the child attempts that we start to see problems in development. “No climbing,” “no running,” “no playing tag,” “no spinning,” “no picking up sticks,” “no getting dirty,” “no jumping on the rocks,” “no climbing the rocks,” we yell when children attempt any kind of risk.

We care about our children so much. We are just trying to protect them. However, sometimes too much protection can cause more harm than good. We are keeping them from attaining the very sensory input they need in order to grow into resilient and able-bodied people. They need to climb, jump, run through the woods, pick up sticks, jump in mud puddles, and fall and get hurt on occasion. These are all natural and necessary experiences that will help develop a healthy sensory system—foundational to learning and accomplishing many of life’s goals.

Three Examples of How Play Outdoors can be Therapeutic:

1. **Sledding:** If you are lucky enough to have snow, sledding is a great sensory activity, especially if you frequently change positions on the sled. For example, if children go down the hill on their bellies, keeping their head and legs up in a superman position, this activates the vestibular (balance) system and improves body awareness over time. Flying saucers send children around and around, helping to establish a good sense of space.

2. **Walking barefoot in the woods:** Walking barefoot on uneven terrain helps to challenge and strengthen the muscles in the ankles and develop the arches of the feet. It also helps to develop a reflex in the foot that helps prevent toe-walking. The sensations of dirt, sticks, and leaves on the bottom of the feet develop healthy touch senses and furthermore, assist with preventing sensory defensiveness on this part of the body. Running through the woods teaches children to effectively and efficiently navigate their environment, while challenging their balance at the same time.

3. **Rolling down a grassy hill:** Rolling down the hill helps to provide necessary deep pressure to the muscles and ligaments – improving the proprioceptive sense. This sense is fundamental in helping children accurately regulate how much force to use when playing games like tag, coloring with crayons without breaking them, and holding a baby chick without squeezing too hard. Also, as the child rolls, they are spinning, which helps to develop a strong vestibular (balance) system.

Playing outdoors is naturally a wonderful sensory experience for children. However, just once-a-week excursions are not enough in order to develop a healthy sensory system. Just like exercising on occasion doesn’t gain lasting benefits, children need to move and play on a frequent and regular basis in order to reap the sensory advantages of the outdoors. They also need to be surrounded by adults who support not only regular outdoor play, but also encourage healthy risk-taking. Their sensory system depends on it.

Additional Reading and Resources

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF NATURAL PLAY

THE RIGHT TO WALK IN THE WOODS: Children's connection to the natural world should be considered a human right

NATURE IS THE ULTIMATE SENSORY EXPERIENCE: A Pediatric Occupational Therapist Makes the Case for Nature Therapy