

Go Out And Play!

Too much screen time and not enough green time can result in major health implications for your children. Research shows that outdoor play boosts more than just their senses.

Compilation and editing: Yvonne Tan; Photos: stock.xchange





Many children are swapping their green time for screen time, as they trade their bikes and skates for couch-ensconcing activities. With media devices becoming more portable and loaded with functions,

it's no wonder kids are less likely than ever to play outside.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study on media use among children, kids in the US perch themselves in front of a television, computer or gaming console for an average of nearly six hours daily.

This lack of green time has worrisome consequences, says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*. He cites increased tendencies towards obesity, depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Kids who play outside are more imaginative and more likely to become emotionally well-balanced adults than those who are sedentary, he argues. Unstructured play encourages creativity, and exposure to a world beyond home gives a child a sense of perspective.

Studying Play

In 2006, scientists from the Norwegian School of Sports Science in Oslo developed a study on the way in which kids spend their time and how much time they dedicate to physical activities. 1,732 children aged between nine and 15 from Denmark, Estonia and Portugal were involved in this study.

The conclusion was that youngsters between five and 16 years old needed to be active for one and a half hours daily. "We would suggest 90 minutes per day to prevent clustering of heart disease risk factors," said Dr Lars Bo Andersen, lead author



Experts say children just need to play physically for short periods cumulatively, rather than long sessions continuously. Even a five- to ten-minute bout of activity where kids run for a little while can be beneficial.

of the research that was published in the medical journal *Lancet*.

Experts in general say that the study doesn't mean children need to be on treadmills or organised athletics – they just need to be able to run around and play physically for short bursts of time cumulatively, rather than long periods continuously. Even a five- to ten-minute bout of activity where kids run for a little while can be beneficial.

Parents need not make radical changes to their children's routine. "Just making sure children play outside will double the amount of physical activity they get," said Andersen whose team also discovered that cardiovascular impairment risk was inversely proportional to the amount of physical activity carried out.

The more active children tested in the study also had healthier blood pressure, cholesterol and insulin, reflecting that the benefits of physical activity applied to all children, not just to obese kids who were normally thought to be at higher risk.

"It would be a mistake only to look at this as an obesity problem," he said. "A lot of children have metabolic problems without being fat. ... It's a question of getting them to be more active and less sedentary."

But perhaps the greatest factor in children's physical activity will be the parents themselves.

It's not just that children should be more active, it's the whole family. "A parent's active lifestyle is a powerful stimulus for a child," says Edward Laskowski, MD, a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation and co-director of the Sports Medicine Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "Set a good example for your children by making physical activity a priority."



A Little More Action Please

To keep your kids off the couch and into the great outdoors, try these ideas:

1. **Establish a routine.** Set aside time each day for a physical activity. Get up early with your children to walk the dog or do jumping jacks together. Start small, gradually adding new activities to the routine as you and your children become more fit.
2. **Get in the game.** Play catch, get the whole family involved in a game of tag or have a skipping contest. Try classic movement games such as Simon says or red light, green light. If you don't remember the rules, make up your own!
3. **Create challenges.** You may even make it a friendly challenge – for example, who can throw the frisbee to the furthest point or cycle to the finishing line in the shortest time?
4. **Try an activity party.** Schedule a bowling party, take the kids to a climbing wall or set up relay races in the field.
5. **Put your kids in charge.** Let each child take a turn choosing the activity of the day or week. Swimming pools, bowling and play areas all count. What matters is that they are doing something active.
6. **To the playground.** Remember how fun it was to hang upside down from the monkey bars? Plus, your kids will develop better social skills being around their peers.
7. **Camping.** Whether you're roughing it in a tent or sleeping in a vehicle, getting out of the house for a night or two will strengthen your kids' bond with nature. Cooking on a campfire, stargazing and listening to the chirping of crickets will do wonders for their souls and for yours.
8. **Hiking.** Take kids tramping through nearby woods and parks, but make sure they understand the importance of trail safety and respect for nature.
9. **Picnics.** Why not dine al fresco? When they're done eating, kids can play tag, climb a tree or explore. They may just find that green time beats screen time!
10. **Be silly.** Let younger children see how much fun you can have while being active. Run like a gorilla. Walk like a spider. Hop like a bunny. Stretch like a cat.

Sources: Associated Press, Mayo Clinic and Positive Thinking