

Back to School: Back Outside

NWF Report Documents How Outdoor Time Boosts Academic Performance

09-01-2010 // Mary Burnette for the National Wildlife Federation



Remember how great it felt to buy that new box of crayons? Selecting new school supplies at this time of year is always fun for kids but parents may be surprised to learn “nature” is one more thing they should put on the back-to-school supply list. According to a new report by National Wildlife Federation, ***Back to School: Back Outside*** (pdf), time spent outdoors both during school and at home helps children become high-performance learners and score higher on standard tests.

Unfortunately, American children spend only minutes a day playing and learning outdoors which presents a new educational challenge for our country. **The report examines the impact of outdoor and environmental education, outdoor time and nature study on student motivation, effectiveness at learning, classroom behavior, focus and standardized test scores.**

The report shows how outdoor time is connected with wide-ranging academic benefits including;

- improved classroom behavior,
- increased student motivation and enthusiasm to learn,

- better performance in math, science, reading and social studies,
- reduced Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD),
- higher scores on standardized tests (including college entrance exams),
- help under-resourced, low-income students perform measurably better in school.

Some teachers don't need convincing. A spring 2010 survey of 1900 educators by the National Wildlife Federation found that:

- 78 percent believe children who spend regular time in unstructured outdoor play are better able to concentrate and perform better in the classroom,
- 82 percent said students need daily unstructured outdoor time as a counterbalance to the significant time spent indoors in front of electronic media,
- 75 percent said students who spend regular time outdoors tend to be more creative and better able to problem solve in the classroom,

Sadly, the trend has been away from outdoor time and outdoor learning in recent years, a shift that does a disservice to the country's children. **"It's ironic that time outside during the school day has been reduced to allow more time for standardized test preparation when it's that very time outdoors that could create higher test scores,"** said **Kevin Coyle, NWF VP for Education and Training.**

Back to school: Back Outside spells out how schools can implement outdoor time through recess, school gardens, campus greening projects, field trips, outdoor education programs, environmental learning and safe routes to school programs.

The report also shares tips for parents and caregivers who want more outdoor time for their kids. These include:

- Get your kids to trade screen time for green time. Limit use of electronic media and encourage your children to just "go outside and play." NWF has prepared a great **Outdoor Family Fun Guide** especially for the Fall season full of easy ideas to squeeze fresh air and green spaces into your family's busy routine.
- Parents concerned about outdoor safety can team up with other parents to create outdoor co-ops, taking turns each week watching the kids while they play outdoors,
- Where safe, don't be so quick to offer rides to school. Let your kids walk and encourage other moms in the neighborhood to do the same with their kids. Walking with your children is a great way for adults to get their daily exercise,

- Be an advocate for outdoor time at your children’s school. Suggest this for a topic at a PTA meeting and let your school’s principal know how you feel,
- Volunteer some time to green your child’s school grounds with more trees and natural vegetation,
- Support outdoor learning programs and let school administrators know that such programs are seen as valuable and should be part of your child’s school experience. Speaking up can go a long way to making outdoor education a reality.

The ***Back to School: Back Outside*** report is part of NWF’s **Be Out There** movement, which was created to give back to American children what they don’t even know they’ve lost, their connection to the natural world. An earlier report from NWF, **Whole Child: Developing Mind, Body and Spirit through Outdoor Play** examines the way in which nature can help families raise happier, healthier children both mentally and physically.

“The evidence is clear, hands-on and real-world aspects of environmental and outdoor education and play improve students’ desire to learn and boost their performance on most measures of student success,” concluded Coyle.