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social-emotional benefits

**Experiencing Nature Supports
Social-emotional Health and
Well-being**

Passive and active engagement in nature supports children’s social-emotional health and well-being. When schools take their classes and programs outside into environments where nature is present—on their school grounds or in local parks—they are placing students in spaces that support their social-emotional health and well-being. Outdoor learning also often includes hands-on curricula, which also supports children’s social interaction skills, confidence building, problem solving, independence, negotiation skills, and creativity.

Unstructured nature play can enhance children’s social and emotional development.

Outdoor learning offers positive benefits for children identified with social, emotional, and/or behavioral conditions including increased pro-social behavior and social well-being. Limited opportunities to engage in outdoor learning negatively impact children’s group social play and interaction.

And time matters. Fewer, longer sessions of outdoor learning (education outside the classroom) are more beneficial than more frequent, shorter sessions and lead to improved pro-social behaviors among students.

Blended learning that combines traditional education with forest school or other models of outdoor curricula enhances children’s social interaction skills, builds confidence,



“The green space at our school (Eagle Rock Elementary) gives my students with autism an opportunity to engage in sensory motor activities and further develop their collaborating and communication skills with peers. It also provides my students with a space that they can visit when they are overstimulated and are experiencing high anxiety. Our green space provides peace, comfort, physiological relaxation, and helps reduce their anxiety.”

— Special Education Teacher, Los Angeles Unified School District

promotes problem-solving and independence, builds negotiation skills, and supports creativity. The relationship between teachers and children is more collaborative outdoors, which is further influenced by teachers' own positive childhood experiences with the outdoors.

Living close to and being in nature can buffer children's social skills as well as improve pro-social environmental attitudes. High levels of exposure to outdoor green space may improve children's pro-social behaviors such as cooperating, sharing, and comforting. Children report increased social connectivity and decreased peer conflict after engaging in greened schoolyards. Plus, early experiences with school gardening programs are associated with increased prosocial environmental attitudes.

Engagement in environmental education and increased access to nature-based programs can improve overall health-related quality of life and increase family support among youth who are systemically under-resourced and black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Opportunities to engage in education outside the classroom can lead to the inclusion of systemically under-resourced and BIPOC students who may be at risk of exclusion in schoolwork and school life. Among these students, increased education outside the classroom inversely correlates with decreased symptoms of



inattention and hyperactivity and adverse peer interactions.

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CREDITS

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National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative

The National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative supports schools and districts around the country in their efforts to reopen safely and equitably using outdoor spaces as strategic, cost-effective tools to increase physical distancing capacity onsite and provide access to abundant fresh air. The Initiative seeks to equitably improve learning, mental and physical health, and happiness for children and adults using an affordable, time-tested outdoor approach to keeping schools open during a pandemic.



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