

## **Why Include Nature in the Sensory Diet of a Child with Autism?**

**Today's culture is full of wonderful new technologies and fantastic opportunities that previous generations never had.** As we parent our children, each coming to us with unique strengths and weaknesses, we should always remain mindful of providing our children with a wide range of life experiences. We all want our children to grow up to be well-rounded adults so it is our job to expose them to varied opportunities that will help create that.

**Children on the Autism spectrum typically need to maintain a diverse sensory diet** in order to help regulate their senses and modify how they experience the world around them. A child who sits in front of a screen machine for hours on end is likely to experience sensory overload to certain senses, such as vision, and leave other senses wanting. This applies to ALL young children and parents need to remember that their young child's brain is developing at a rapid rate and precautions need to be taken to ensure it is being shaped appropriately.

Sometimes it may be easier to let our children become engrossed in indoor activities such as screen machine viewing and other technological endeavors, but we really need to remember the word balance here. Creating various opportunities, inside and outside the house, are important for maintaining a healthy sensory diet and optimal brain development for any child.

### **How well is your child's sensory diet balanced with outdoor play in nature?**

When we immerse our children in the great outdoors many wonderful things begin to happen, all of which are beneficial to their physical, social, emotional and spiritual development. The experiences a child encounters in his natural environment will work to enhance brain development and make new connections in important areas.

Here is a refresher course of some of the advantages playing outside in nature can have for our children as well as suggestions for ways to promote creativity, curiosity and learning.

**1) Nature encourages the expansion of important skills.** Nature is a great place to support the development of the social and communication skills that children with autism are often weak in. Providing them with opportunities to play within nature, with or without friends, is a wonderful way to practice these adaptive skills. Since movement stimulates the verbal centers of the brain, outdoor play can be very helpful in enhancing communication skills. With friends or family at hand, cooperative play in the great outdoors can provide a relaxed environment in which social skills can be learned, practiced, or observed.

**2) Nature offers restorative experiences that can feed the soul.** A small corner of the yard or the shelter beneath an outside staircase can provide solace and comfort to a child. Learning to be in a quiet space is a skill that many of our current youth find it difficult to master. A secret place to go to that restores calm and thoughtful reflection will go far in promoting the endangered talent of spending time with one's self. Did you have a special place as a child? Parents can do much to role model a healthy relationship with the quiet of nature. Bring a pad of paper and pencil on your next walk with your child, find a safe place for both of you to sit and draw or write what you see, then share stories about it.

**3) Nature utilizes all five of the senses.** A good sensory diet is important for most children on the autism spectrum and being immersed in nature can provide calming or stimulating experiences based on your child needs. Being out in nature is a great atmosphere for encouraging gross motor activities such as running, jumping, walking and climbing. In addition to movement, natural environments such as farms, zoos, fish tanks,

or the ocean can provide wonderful stimulation for vision, touch and smell. Listening to or paying attention to nature's sounds, like the sound of the waves against the rocks on the beach and birds twittering, are some ways in which auditory senses can be activated.

**4) Nature is broadcasted in a 3-D spectrum.** Talk about a quality 3-D movie, you can't get any better than the great outdoors. The three dimensional world of nature has an abundance of rich experiences to offer children as opposed to the two dimensional possibilities of a high definition TV or fast acting video game. When fingers and hands are in contact with only a button on a remote or a game stick to push and pull and eyes are glued to a flat screen, the type of neural connections being made in the brain are limited. Regulating your child's screen time to the recommended viewing times of the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) will make it easier for you to balance your child's experiences and ensure a well rounded approach to life.

**5) Secondary benefits are included.** There are many other benefits that occur when we encourage our children to continually interact with their natural environment, such as better sleeping habits due to increased exposure to fresh outside air and more opportunity for full body exercise. When a child gets caught up in exploring the wonders that abound in nature, their curiosity about the world and creativity are spiked. All in all, nature is a wonderful gift that is given to all of us to enjoy and learn from. To not take advantage of the many lessons it has to offer is a disservice to ourselves and our future.

Remember to be proactive and start early to emphasize the importance of exploring the outdoors and playing in nature. If you consistently expose your child to a habit of being in and interacting with nature while young and balance it with their technology based recreational activities, you will not have to surgically extricate the remote or other electronic devices from their hands and do battle with them to get off the couch and go outside to play when they are older.