

Close the laptop and go outside

As I was riding my bike through Skinner Butte Park recently, I was amused and entertained watching a young couple enhancing the brain development of their two young children.

What were they doing? Playing tag.

A chase game. No toys or tools or electronic devices, just a joyous interactive play experience, chasing each other in the grass, surrounded by trees near the Willamette River.

As we continue to enjoy summer weather, it's a good time to take advantage of the benefits of outdoor play and nature in enhancing the development of young children.

Many parents are concerned about difficult or challenging behavior exhibited by their young children, and there is evidence that supports those concerns.

Studies show that mild to moderate behavior challenges have more than doubled in preschool programs over the last 30 years, and that aggressive or severe behavior incidents also have increased.

Coincidentally, over the same period, the amount of time children engage in outdoor gross motor play has decreased dramatically while the amount and type of screen exposure children experience has exploded.

This confluence of decreased movement and increased sedentary activity has contributed to increases in challenging behavior.

In addition, parents are consistently reporting concerns with their children's behavior at home, especially around mealtime and when setting limits for the use of electronic devices.

While consistent routines, good nutrition and quality parent-child interaction time are important, the value of outdoor motor play should be noted, as it leads to positive outcomes.

And although it may seem counterintuitive, children's brains are in a better state to focus and pay attention when they engage in running, jumping, bouncing, swinging, climbing, spinning and other movement activities. Physical activity leads to greater learning opportunities.

For children with physical limitations, such as developmental disabilities or other medical conditions, sensory-based activities can have some of the same effect on the brain.

Providing activities with a variety of sensory stimuli — including visuals, sounds, smells, tastes, textures and movement — affects the brain in ways that benefit cognitive functioning and social emotional development.

For example, research shows that music activates certain areas in the brain, whether or not the person is actively listening. That can have a calming effect or a stimulative effect, depending on the music, the context and other sensory elements. By activating the brain, music enhances learning and development.

In addition to movement and physical activity, just being in nature has a positive impact on children's focus, their ability to listen and on their brain development.

Studies have shown that spending time in natural settings leads to increased attention span, improved memory, decreased stress, more positive moods, improved resilience and increases in frontal lobe activity.

Being in the great outdoors leads to greater creativity and increases in higher-level cognitive processes.

Living in the Eugene-Springfield area, we are privileged to have a plethora of park space, much of which is in a natural setting. We are also lucky to be one hour from the mountains and one hour from the coast.

Best of all, physical activities in nature are generally inexpensive or free, and they can help strengthen parent-child relationships.

Something as simple as a walk by the river or playing chase in the park will yield developmental riches for your child and is good for you, too.

I hope you can take advantage of these sunny, warm days to enhance your young child's development.

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