

Head Outdoors to Improve Attention Span

Did you know that walking in a park may increase attention span and concentration? Or that interacting with nature results in a type of restoration for the body and the brain? Try to remember a recent event when you spent time outdoors in a natural environment. You may walk slowly and attend to all of your visual surroundings – a bird chirping, a sunset, the green grass of Spring. When you return indoors, you feel relaxed and calm. Now try to remember the last time you were outdoors in a busier environment, perhaps a city. Your attention may be focused on planning when to cross a street, avoiding cars and other city obstacles. These two environments rely on your brain to use two different types of attention – involuntary and voluntary. Concentrating on topics that interest you or something that grabs your attention involves involuntary attention. Concentrating on blocking out distractions to focus on the topic at hand involves voluntary attention (which can fatigue easily). When the brain experiences involuntary attention it allows voluntary attention to rest and recover.



Some researchers question whether children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) experience deficits in voluntary attention resulting in the fluctuating attention span that you see in children with ADHD. The “restorative” action of the walks in nature call upon involuntary attention which in turn can possibly improve voluntary attention.

With the amount of television and computer time that children are exposed to daily, more time spent outdoors is essential. Here are several ideas to encourage increased nature time for all children:

1. Take hikes and short walks in the woods. If you need a wheelchair accessible path, search state parks for handicapped accessible trails or try bike paths that are paved.
2. Go letterboxing or geocaching – Letterboxing is a great family activity for people of all ages. You can go to www.letterboxing.org for a list of clues throughout the USA. You print off the clues, walk to find them and stamp a marking in your log book. Use your smartphone or GPS to go geocaching and find hidden treasures.
3. Gardening – plant a garden with children. Plant seeds in pots so that all children can assist.
4. Go on scavenger hunts for outdoor materials.
5. Allow children to play outdoors in dirt, mud and puddles.
6. Go on a bug hunt – see how many different bugs you can identify
7. Start a nature collection such as rocks, acorns, leaves or pine cones.
8. Go fishing, frog hunting, horseback riding or birdwatching.
9. Build a structure out of natural materials (i.e. fort, collage made out of sticks or leaves, etc).
10. Encourage teachers to plan lessons outdoors.

Fresh air makes everyone feel healthier, relaxed and perhaps improves attention. It is a simple way to improve concentration with no side effects (except skinned knees).

References:

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