

EXPERIENCE & EXPLORE

It's Great Outside!

by Elena Takaki

Ahhh! Spring has sprung! And whether or not the weather has warmed up yet, it's time to celebrate the greatness of Maryland's great outdoors!

When is the last time you went outside and played? *Just* played, with no one telling you how to play or what to play? These days, all of us – including kids – are so busy, with homework, sports and all sorts of other planned activities, that we forget the importance of just playing... and the importance of playing outdoors!

Why is it important? Well, we now know that being outdoors, especially if you're between 8 and 13 years of age, affects your emotional, intellectual and physical development.

Playing in nature can help you develop creativity and problem-solving skills. Some doctors believe it can also improve your focus, self-discipline, cooperation and self-awareness. Think about it – when you're outside and looking at a larger world, your

On average today's youth spends six and a half hours every day in front of a television or computer. This inactivity can lead to unhealthy habits, excessive weight gain and other health problems. Besides, doesn't breathing fresh air and hanging outside with your friends sound better than being cooped up indoors?

Now, if you're not used to playing outside without a planned activity, you should know that you can do just about anything, depending on your interests.

Do you like quiet places and spending some time alone?

- Write stories or poems.
- Draw or paint pictures.
- Observe – after just a short while of paying attention you'll be amazed by the number of insects, birds and animals you'll see and their activities. Take wildlife watching to the next level

- Make up new rules for a game of tag or hide and seek; for instance when "it" changes, have everyone hop on one foot.
- Have a contest to see who can correctly name the most types of trees or flowers.

Are you spending time with an adult?

- Head to your nearest state park and hike one of the many trails (tip: be sure to use a map).
- Identify plants and wildlife together. Keep a journal of what you find and where.
- Visit your local stream; pick up some small stream rocks and see the aquatic insects that live there.

These are just a few ideas to get you started. Once you feel the sun on your face, the wind in your hair and fresh air in your lungs, you'll be



brain gets thinking about new ideas and you're constantly seeing, hearing and feeling new things. Not to mention, it's just plain fun to explore and discover the unknown.

Going outside can also help keep you physically healthy. Doctors say the growing problem of obesity in young people is due to the fact that kids do not get enough exercise.

– grab some binoculars and a book and see how many birds you can identify; keep a journal.

Do you prefer adventures with friends?

- Bury some "treasure"; draw a map or write clues for your friends to use in their search.

inspired to do your own thing! No matter what activity you choose – or if you choose no activity at all, turn off the TV, put away the video games, walk away from the computer, and get out there! It really is *GREAT* outside! ❖

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