

Nature-Based Programming for Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Community Perspective

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Who needs nature? Arguably, we all do.

Ample and growing evidence finds that engagement with nature positively impacts all areas of childhood development. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder experience unique sensory and developmental challenges, which may be buffered through nature experiences. Careful attention to creating Sensory Responsive™ nature-based programming and spaces promotes a concerted community response to meet their unique developmental needs. Achieving the goal of impactful nature-based programming for children and youth with autism spectrum disorder necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that embraces input from the autism community, therapists, educators, designers, and planners.

Children and Nature

Who needs nature? Arguably, we all do. Beginning with Roger Ulrich's seminal "View Through a Window" study published in 1984, in which he found that patients recovering from surgery whose window view was of nature versus a brick wall had better outcomes, the research on nature and health has literally exploded. Not a month passes that several compelling evidence-based studies are published that confirms the value of interacting with nature, be it to improve physical health, reduce blood pressure and stress, to better focus, to feel less lonely, and to experience hope, to name just a few. Research methodology has become increasingly complex, adding further credence to the important people-nature relationship that we all need and deserve, for the sake of our health and humanity.

A variety of studies looking specifically at children and nature have found that interaction with nature buffers emotional challenges (Vanaken & Danckearts, 2018). Participation in school garden programs empower children to become more comfortable with eating the produce they grow and to educate their families on the value of eating fresh fruits and vegetables (McCormick, 2017).