

\_ACTIVITIES AND ADVENTURE

# How to Enjoy the Benefits of Nature Inside, When You Can't Get Outside

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Spending time in nature is so beneficial to our health and well-being. It calms us – reducing feelings of stress, anxiety, and anger.

It's also been shown to improve focus and attention, as well as reduce blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and the production of stress hormones. It even makes us friendlier and more apt to reach out to others in our community.

Playing outside is one of the best activities for our kids, but what if it's too cold or too rainy to go outside? Is it possible to experience the benefits of nature from indoors?

Nothing beats actually immersing ourselves in the natural environment outside, but science proves that we can capture the essence of what nature has to offer through images, sounds, and plants inside our home.

## **Nature imagery.**

Amazingly, just looking at pictures of nature scenes can make us feel similar to actually spending time outdoors. A recent study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that you can reduce stress by simply looking at images of nature. When participants viewed pictures of natural scenes, their stress level decreased because their parasympathetic nervous system (which helps us to calm down) was activated.

Spending time in nature can also make us feel more compassionate – connected to others and our environment. Scientists proved this by observing brain activity using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). In the experiment, they discovered that when participants viewed scenes from the natural environment, the parts of their brain associated with empathy and love lit up. On the other hand, when they looked at urban scenes, the parts of the brain associated with fear and anxiety were activated.

Finally, Dr. Marc Berman and researchers at the University of Michigan conducted a study in which participants took 10 minute breaks in a quiet room to look at pictures of a nature scene or city street. Cognitive performance improved after the nature break. Although the boost was not as large as when participants actually took a walk outside among trees, it was more effective than taking a walk in the city.

#### **Nature sounds.**

Listening to nature can help relax us and improve our mood. A research team at the University of Florida looked at how nature sounds affect people's mental and physical health. They measured pulse rate, muscle tension, and self-reported stress of a group of people and then had them listen to one of three sounds: silence, music by Mozart, or ocean waves. Then the researchers gave the participants another medical exam and asked how stressed they felt.

There was no significant change for people who listened to silence or classical music, but those who listened to ocean waves had considerably lower muscle tension, heart rates, and stress. These positive changes occurred quite rapidly – within five to seven minutes of listening to the sounds of nature. Imagine how quickly we can calm our children down by playing some soothing nature sounds!

In another study, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Acoustician Jonas Braasch found that listening to natural sounds (specifically birdcalls) during a work break can boost performance afterward. Braasch believes that nature sounds have a restorative effect because they create a more comfortable environment where people feel happy and satisfied. He also thinks this idea can be applied to other stressful environments, like hospitals, where nature sounds may potentially help people heal faster.

Experts found, however, that not all nature sounds have the same calming effect. The best sounds are those that give a sense of natural space and mimic the biorhythms of an ecosystem like a forest. Loud chirping and croaking is just not going to cause the same calming feelings as sounds of water, which are very soothing because of their slow, rhythmic whooshing noises.

#### **Plants.**

Plants and flowers have long been known to cheer people up. Research done in hospitals, offices, and schools has consistently found that even a simple plant in a room can have a significant impact on reducing stress and anxiety.

Plants actually boost healing, according to a study at Kansas State University. Researchers learned that viewing plants during recovery from surgery can lead to a significant improvement in physiological responses. Patients had lower blood pressure and less pain, anxiety, and fatigue compared to patients who did not have plants in their rooms. In addition, studies found that patients who are able to view nature scenes or plants in their room experience less pain after surgery.

#### **How to bring more nature inside.**

According to Netta Weinstein, professor at University of Rochester, we can maximize our connections with nature even if we are unable to get outside. She explains, "Because of the hidden benefits of connecting with nature, people should take advantage of opportunities to get away from built environments and, when inside, they should surround themselves with plants, natural objects, and images of the natural world."

How can we give our children experiences of nature on the days that we just can't fit in outdoor play? Here are some ideas to expose your children to the amazing aspects of nature from inside:

- Visit indoor sanctuaries of nature such as an arboretum, butterfly garden, botanical garden, greenhouse, science museum, or aquarium.
- Decorate your house with awe-inspiring images of nature. Collect gorgeous pieces from famous photographers like Ansel Adams and Philip Hyde or start a family hobby of taking pictures of nature that you love to display throughout your house.
- Display plants throughout your house.
- Start an indoor garden of herbs and flowers.
- Watch nature shows, movies, and documentaries as a family.
- Include pictures and objects of nature that are green and blue in your house, colors known to calm us down.
- Play nature sounds in your home, especially at bedtime.

The beauty of nature is that it has the power to impact us no matter where we experience it. By giving our children a multitude of ways to observe nature through their senses, they can enjoy the many benefits it has to offer on any day of the year.

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