

Discuss whether there really is a need for children to play freely in the outdoors

Outdoor play is essential for children, with studies revealing that those who play outside receive additional health benefits, including improved immune function.¹ (Kids First, 2025) It has its benefits, but also presents its challenges, which will be covered in this essay, as well as the importance of not just any play, but free play.

Play is shown to increase resilience, improve problem-solving skills, encourage empathy, help with fine and gross motor skills, improve eyesight, and even prevent obesity.² (Lockhart, 2017) This shows how important play is for children and that there is a need for children to play. Whether it is something as simple as doing the monkey bars or at a play park or something slightly more advanced like going for a hike up a mountain, being in the outdoors has been shown to encourage a growth mindset and gives children the opportunity to try something new and challenge themselves.³ (Toddle About, 2025)

Although playing in the outdoors for children has its benefits, it does come with its challenges. A report has stated that the amount of time that children are spending outside has declined by 50% in just one generation.⁴ (Stephens, 2025) Today's children are spending more and more time on technology attached to screens, and studies have indicated that the negative effects that these have on children are closely linked to the decrease in the amount of time that they are spending playing in the outdoors.⁵ (Anđić and Ivić, 2024) Similarly, it might not be the technology that is the issue, but the parents who are holding them back because they are worried about the safety concerns that come with playing in the outdoors. To make sure that their child is safe, they are either dictating how they play in the outdoors, so that they can reduce the amount of risk that their child is facing, or trying to eliminate it by not allowing them to play outdoors at all.

¹ [The Benefits of Outdoor Play for Child Development - Kids First](#)

² [Let children play | Alex Elliott Lockhart | TEDxBasel - YouTube](#)

³ [Nature and Nurture: Why Kids Need to Play Outside | Toddle About](#)

⁴ ['Anti-play culture' limits children's time outside, report finds - BBC News](#)

⁵ [DOI Serbia - Outdoor play and time spent by school-aged children using digital technology - Anđić, Dunja; Ivić, Sonja](#)

What is free play? This is when there are no set rules for how a child plays. They themselves get to choose where, what, when, and how they play and who they play with, based on their own preferences.⁶ (Naitre et Grandir, 2023) Free play allows a child to express themselves in a way that they choose, and it gives them the chance to develop their independence. The older that children get, with their parents protecting them from the outdoors, the less likely they are to develop how to access and manage risk independently, and might always be reliant on someone to do this for them.⁷ (Skenazy, 2021)

If children are playing outdoors, then they are getting the benefits of improved fine and motor skills, decreased risk of obesity etc, but if the caregiver is not allowing free play and is setting rules as to how, when, where they play and who they play with, then they are not going to be able to develop simple skills that will equip them later on in life. If they are not allowed to reach the next stepping stone because they might slip and hurt themselves, then they are always going to want to shy away from reaching that next stepping stone, whether it actually be a stepping stone or a metaphorical stepping stone for perhaps attempting the higher challenge in a maths assignment.

Reference list

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⁶ [Free play](#)

⁷ [Today's Children Don't Get to Play Outside Unsupervised Until They are Two Years Older Than Their Parents Were - Let Grow](#)

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