

# Nature is Fuel for the Soul

By Dr Justin Coulson

Children are spending up to 90% of their lives [indoors](#). The [Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll](#) of 2,036 parents found that most Australian preschoolers (55%) don't play outdoors every day. Data on adolescents is hard to come by, but international surveys all suggest the same thing: time outdoors for our kids is plummeting.

According to the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) (AIFS), the main reasons children spend more time indoors are:

- a lack of suitable outdoor spaces
- parental concerns about safety, traffic and crime
- children spending more time on electronic devices
- study being prioritised over play (e.g. spending time learning spelling or maths rather than playing – whether at home or at preschool).

There are few things more valuable for your child's wellbeing, however, than getting them outside, touching grass. The research on kids and nature is substantial.

A [2023 overview](#) pulled together 36 systematic reviews on the topic. [One review](#) looked at six “schoolyard greening” projects - basically, making school outdoor spaces more natural - and found real improvements in students' physical activity and social and emotional health. Another [systematic review](#) focused specifically on nature exposure and emotional and behavioural outcomes. Every randomised controlled trial in the review - all five of them - pointed in the same direction. More nature, higher wellbeing, less stress.

If my brief overview with links to incredibly useful studies has convinced you that outdoor time matters, even as we approach the cold of winter, the question becomes “how do I get the kids outside”?

The critical element will be *relationships*. Kids want to be where people they love are hanging out. If you're inside holding a hot cup of cocoa, they'll want to be there. But if you're brave enough to rug up and step outside (or if their friends are doing something outdoors), the battle is all but won.

Here are ten ideas for getting our kids (and ourselves) outside. This will, of course, depend on what is accessible near you.

**1. Go for a walk or hike.** Simple, free, and underrated. For younger kids, turn it into a scavenger hunt — make a quick bingo card with things like birds, flowers, pinecones, or different coloured letterboxes. For older kids, just being side-by-side on a walk can open up conversations that would never happen face-to-face at the kitchen table. Some of my best chats with my kids have happened while we were both staring at the footpath ahead of us.

**2. Get moving.** Dig the bikes out of the garage. Dust off the scooters. If you're feeling brave, find the skateboard. Getting moving outdoors — even just around the block — often turns out to be more fun than anyone expected. Fair warning though: if you haven't been on a skateboard since 1987, take it steady. They disappear from underneath you faster than you remember. Ask me how I know.

**3. Find a park or open space.** State parks, national parks, city parks, local reserves — parks are genuinely one of Australia's great underused resources. Hikes, waterfalls, skate parks, caves, green space, abseiling... yes, and also leeches, mozzies, and the occasional spiderweb to the face. That's what makes it memorable. The greener the space, the better — for the kids, obviously. Not for you. You're fine.

**4. Water play.** Beach, river, creek, backyard sprinkler, or just a bucket and a hose. Kids and water are a combination that never really fails. And yes, it might be getting cooler — but have you noticed that children are apparently immune to cold water? They'll be in it regardless. Let them.

**5. Go rock pooling.** With some of the most accessible coastline in the world, Australians are criminally underusing rock pools. All you need is low tide, a pair of old shoes, and a curious kid. The combination of water, wildlife, and the hunt — what's under that rock? what's in that crack? — keeps kids absorbed for far longer than you'd expect. It's also a surprisingly good workout for adults who spend the whole time crouched down going "ooh, look at this one."

**6. Have an outdoor picnic.** Grab a blanket and take a meal outside. It doesn't need to be fancy — a pizza from down the road counts. There's a headland near our home on the Sunshine Coast where families gather at sunset, eat whatever they've brought, and let the kids roam. It happens every single week and it never gets old. Something about eating outside just makes everything taste better and everyone feel calmer.

**7. Get outside after dark.** Camp in the backyard. Head to a campground for a couple of nights where you can light a real fire and actually see the stars. Go stargazing on the trampoline. Or simply take the kids and the dog for a walk after dinner. We call it the "digestion walk" at our place — and some of the best conversations happen on those quiet evening loops around the neighbourhood when everyone has eaten and nobody has anywhere to be.

**8. Outdoor art.** This one lands particularly well with kids up to around age 12. Chalk on the driveway or footpath is always a hit — you end up with an entire neighbourhood canvas. Paintbrushes and spray bottles work brilliantly too, either with water on concrete or paint on paper pinned to the fence. Get the shoes off, get the aprons on, and accept that something is going to get stained.

**9. Grow something.** A vegie patch, a pot of herbs on the balcony, or even just a seed in a cup on the windowsill. Gardening is one of the most well-researched nature-based wellbeing activities we have, and for Australian kids with any outdoor space at all, it's enormously accessible. There's something quietly powerful about a child who plants something, tends to it, watches it grow, and then eats it. It teaches patience and care in a way that very little else does.

**10. Follow your child's lead.** Ask your kids what they want to do — as long as it's outside. Sports, flying kites, building sandcastles, climbing trees, digging holes for absolutely no reason, throwing a frisbee, setting up a cake stall on the corner of the street. There are as many ways to be outside as there are kids who need to be there. Sometimes the best thing you can do is open the back door and see what unfolds.



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