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Nature Therapy: Movement and Mental Health for Kids

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Sally, a 5-year-old kindergarten student, continues to get orange marks on her behavior chart at school, which indicates that she has not been making “good choices” in class. On a typical day, Sally arrives at school at 8:15 a.m. and is escorted to the cafeteria, where she can eat breakfast or just sit and wait quietly until it is time to go to class. Once the bell rings, Sally follows along in a straight line to her classroom, where she is to put her bookbag in her locker and take a seat at her desk. On this particular day, Sally sees Katie and begins talking to her about her new puppy. Both girls get a warning for not going straight to their seats. Sally sits in her seat but feels “itchy in her muscles” and begins to wiggle in her chair. She tries to be quiet, but with each twist and turn her chair squeaks. She gets another warning.

Sally is relieved when it is circle time, as she can now sit on the floor. However, her legs get tired in crisscross applesauce, and she needs to stretch them. She stretches right into Adam who yells, "Sally kicked me!" Sally gets another warning. Sally can't wait for recess when she can stretch her body and not worry about hitting anyone. Only, it is 47 degrees outside, and the school policy indicates that it has to be 50 degrees or above to play outside. Today, recess will be indoors, at tables with games or puzzles. Sally picks out a game and accidentally trips and drops the pieces on the floor. She begins to cry. She is overwhelmed with the need to run, jump, and stretch—and now she must sit still for yet another 30 minutes until lunchtime, where she will sit again. She starts throwing the game pieces all over the room. Sally receives her final warning—and gets an orange on her behavior chart before noon (Fisher, 2019 p. 29).

Children and Movement

Children are spending less and less time engaging with the outdoors, while the rates of emotional and physical disorders continue to rise (Fisher, 2019; Hanscom, 2016; Jordan, 2014; Louv, 2008, 2016). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the average school-age child gets roughly 15–30 minutes of recess per day, often broken into 15-minute increments. Although research suggests that children should engage in daily outdoor play for three to five hours (Hanscom, 2016), they spend at least that amount of time on their digital devices (Fisher, 2019; Hanscom, 2016; Louv, 2016). By no means is technology demonized. However, the increase in device use needs to be mediated with outdoor play (Fisher, 2019; Louv, 2008, 2016).

Children spending hours immobile (e.g., baby seats, bouncy chairs, school desks) and not moving their bodies (Fisher, 2019, p. 30) is resulting in children presenting with developmental delays in basic motor skills of rolling, crawling, walking, and balance (Fisher, 2019; Hanscom, 2016). More children are obese and diagnosed with high cholesterol, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes (Hales et al., 2017; Mayer-Davis et al., 2017). In addition to physical delays and disorders, there is an increase in aggressive and disruptive behavior, resulting in a staggering rate of children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder—inattentive and hyperactive types, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder (Fisher, 2019). Visser et al. (2014) found a 42% increase in children diagnosed with ADD between 2003 and 2011. Children are not provided ample opportunities to move their bodies in varied ways. Further, children's natural inclination to fidget when their bodies need to move is being punished and pathologized.

Clinical and mental health counseling is a field that can address the mental health needs of children and "involves a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (ACA, 2017). Professional counselors use a variety of creative, innovative and empirically based approaches that promote overall wellness, this includes the integration of nature in clinical practice.



Nature Therapy: Movement and Mental Health

The natural world provides a multisensory experience that engages the whole brain and whole body in organic ways (Fisher, 2019; Hanscom, 2016; Jordan, 2014; Louv, 2008, 2016). Children need to move. Specifically, children need to move in nature in nondirected ways that allow them to problem solve and navigate diverse terrain and be exposed to multisensory experiences (Fisher, 2019). In addition to improving physicality through movement, engaging in the natural world “enhances the immune system, strengthens the connection between the body and the self, and provides varied physical challenges that build motor skills and self-confidence” (Fisher, 2019, p. 31). Finally, engaging in the natural world promotes self-regulation and a calm and alert state, organically (Li, 2018).

Nature Therapy promotes a healthy immune system and a calm and alert state. The center of the earth functions like a battery, producing and emitting negative ions (Ober et al., 2014). Additionally, green space (e.g., forests) creates phytoncides and terpenes through photosynthesis. When we inhale and absorb the negative ions and terpenes through our interactions in the natural world (e.g., walking on the grass barefoot, swimming in the ocean, inhaling the pungent air in a forest), our bodies respond by lowering blood pressure, cortisol and adrenaline levels, and increasing serotonin, promoting a calm and alert state (Fisher, 2019; Li, 2018). Additionally, exposure to green and blue space promotes the production of Natural Killer (NK) cells that enhance the immune system. Research indicates that just 15–20 minutes of engaging in the natural world will produce these responses that will last up to a week (Fisher, 2019; Li, 2018). Therefore, a walk in the park does so much more than just “clear one’s head.” It reboots the body’s neurology and engages the parasympathetic system, promoting a calmer state.

Nature Therapy strengthens the connection between body and self. Navigating the natural world is a multisensory experience, requiring attention to the present moment. The sun feels warm. The water is cool. The body will respond to the external setting with varied responses, such as perspiration or goosebumps. In addition, engaging in nature allows children to experience their embodied self. Running through a meadow, heart beating fast, strong legs powering up a hill. Children begin to connect to the wonderful ways their bodies can move (Fisher, 2019). For example, I was volunteering at a weekend camp for children with disabilities. My buddy was a 10-year-old boy living with cerebral palsy.

While his muscles were contracted and his body was wheelchair-bound, his spirit was fearless. With some accommodations my buddy went swimming in the creek, hiked the trail, and plowed through the fields chasing butterflies. At night he sat around the bonfire with his friends roasting marshmallows, recounting the

adventures of the day and gazing at the stars. My buddy's relationship with his body was one of awe, wonder, and reverence. He truly knew the meaning of living his embodied self (Fisher, 2019, p. 32).

Nature Therapy provides physical challenges that build motor skills and enhance self-confidence. The outdoors provides opportunities to negotiate diverse terrain. Problem solving climbing over a fallen tree on a pathway, catching and releasing tadpoles, navigating slippery hills, all create opportunities for learning new skills and increasing self-confidence (Fisher, 2019; Kahn & Kellert, 2002). Interaction in the natural world allows children to "explore, interact, recognize problems, attempt solutions, make mistakes, and generate more adequate solutions" (Kahn & Kellert, 2002, p. 111). As children master skills, they begin to trust their ability to problem-solve, and navigate their world, both physically and cognitively.

Nature-Informed Interventions

Engaging in the natural world provides a whole brain, whole body platform that improves immunity, creates a calm and alert state, strengthens the embodied self, and promotes self-confidence. Nature, as a co-therapist, provides sound interventions that are both primal and innovative. There are numerous ways to bring nature-informed work into a counseling practice. However, here are a few to get you started:

Prescribe an outdoor activity. If you are limited in outdoor access with a child, you can prescribe homework that incorporates outdoor time. For example, you can instruct the child to spend 15 minutes outside, two to three times a week, just noticing their natural world. An activity called Sit Spot invites the participant to find a place in nature and just be for a few minutes. The participant should take notice of how they are feeling (inside and outside), as well as what is going on around them in nature. What do they notice? Hear? Smell? Another activity I like is Cloud Spotting where you watch the clouds move in formation. Additionally, I like to invite clients to befriend a tree and spend time with this tree every week. What do they notice? Older participants can take a journal and reflect on their experiences.

Add outdoor sessions. If you are fortunate enough to have outdoor space, take your sessions outside. Incorporate walk-talk sessions, or simply bring a blanket and have sessions in a private outdoor space.

Incorporate virtual walks or window views into sessions. Nature therapy can easily be incorporated in telehealth sessions. Invite the participant to look out the window and describe what they see or hear. Kahn and Kellert (2002) discovered that simply looking out at a natural space can aid in self-regulation and improve productivity. Additionally, take a virtual nature walk with the child. Using earbuds for privacy and a privacy screen, invite your participant to take their device outdoors as well and share an outdoor session with the child. You can incorporate such activities as Nature Bingo or Nature Treasure Hunt, while conducting a virtual session.

Ethical Considerations

It is always important to consider the following when integrating nature activities into your counseling practice:

1. Be certain to add the risks of Nature Therapy (e.g., sunburn, bug bites, allergies) to your Informed Consent form.
2. Discuss privacy and confidentiality issues. Public outdoor spaces cannot easily be regulated. Therefore, remind participants of the restrictions of privacy.
3. Know your participant's relationship with nature. If there are allergies or phobias related to being outdoors, honor the child and do not force the engagement to outdoors. Introduce natural elements slowly and with your client's consent.
4. Seek training. Although we all can include natural elements in our therapeutic sessions, it is imperative to get training in specialized fields. For example, you do not want to "try out" kayak therapy if you have not had training in both the use of a kayak, water safety, and the therapeutic use of a kayak.

It is critical for children to engage in movement, especially nondirected outdoor movement. Yet, they are often restricted due to over-scheduling, school policies, lack of exposure, and saturation with digital entertainment. As mental health professionals, we can introduce therapeutic activities that include natural elements and promote whole body, whole brain engagement. Nature provides the perfect multi-sensory platform for therapeutic interactions to occur that benefit both client and counselor.

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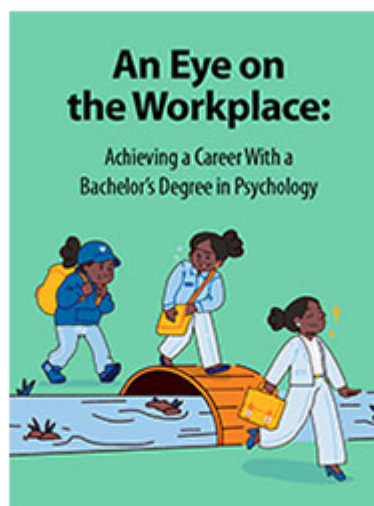
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