

# Getting Outdoors

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES & PARENTS



Children and adults with disabilities and their families will benefit from time spent outside in a number of ways. Research has shown children who regularly play outdoors tend to be less stressed and more creative, which ultimately can lead to happier, healthier, and more confident children. Time in nature also can encourage a sense of connection to community and place that will have benefits even beyond the individual. While the presence of certain types of disabilities may present challenges for some in getting outdoors regularly, the benefits to the health and well-being of the child or adult may make the efforts to overcome those barriers enticing. Resources are included on the reverse side of this Tip Sheet that will address some of these barriers.

### Starting Young

The key to instilling a love of nature in children is to begin getting outside regularly at an early age. Even infants will enjoy being outside listening to birds singing, watching clouds drift by, and feeling the wind tickle their skin. Most toddlers and young children enjoy getting dirty, and some research suggests that playing in dirt can greatly improve the overall immunity that a child develops. So, dig for worms, play in a creek or in the rain, catch fireflies, and go for a walk or a ride in the wagon.

An important idea for parents to remember is to encourage kids to be self-directed explorers from the start. Let the child lead the play. Not only will this build confidence, it also will reveal what the child enjoys most about being

outdoors. Rocks? Animals? Noticing colors and textures? Quiet/relaxation time? Physical activity? Let the child discover his or her interests outside and then support those interests.

### Building Skills

Use the outdoors to build language through curiosity. Ask questions like:

- I wonder where that ladybug gets its food?
- Why are the leaves changing colors?
- Do these flowers smell the same?

Help your child learn to ask these bigger questions. Even sightseeing from the car can be a great way to encourage curiosity and language building through observation of nature.

- Why is the sky getting dark?
- What color are the clouds/sky/sunset?
- How tall do you think that mountain is?

### Starting Small

Start young and also start small. You don't have to book a hiking trip to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Just spending time regularly in the back yard or at a neighborhood park will be beneficial. Go on a picnic. Take favorite toys outside. Read stories and look at photography books that depict animals and outdoor places. Reading about nature is a great way to build a connection. Plant some seeds. Watch the sunrise or the sunset. Another small way to connect is to encourage family members to pay attention to what is outside of the car when you are driving. Encourage them to point out natural wonders/beauties along the way, i.e., a beautiful tree, an animal, or snow falling. The point is to look out the window!

### Where To Explore?

In addition to your own back yard and neighborhood parks, Tennessee has 749+ greenways and trails, many of which are fully accessible, and connect neighborhoods to schools, recreation areas, open spaces, and other points of activity. Explore what your area has to offer. Many cities have family hiking clubs where people get together

*Please see reverse.*



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

# Getting Outdoors

## TIPS AND RESOURCES

and explore in groups. Did you know that Tennessee has 54 state parks with a variety of activities on both land and water? Tennessee has abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation and many activities are free. Connect on Facebook with Tennessee State Parks to stay informed about special events and group activities throughout the state.

### Unplugging Your Teens and Yourself

It is no surprise that children and adults today are spending less time outdoors than in previous generations. Television, video games, and portable electronics have great appeal and are enticing alternatives to getting outdoors, spending time in imaginative play, and interacting with family. The American Academy of Pediatrics links too much screen time with obesity, irregular sleep, behavior challenges, lower academic performance, and even violence. So, consider turning off the TV at mealtime, keeping electronics out of bedrooms, not using screen time as a reward, and designating screen-free days. While there is a lot that technology can offer us, modeling and encouraging balance in this area will benefit your children in the long run.

### Be Flexible

When getting outdoors with children both with and without disabilities, remember that you will need to be flexible. Be willing to throw away your expectations, change plans, or go at a slower pace. A child might want to study the color of a flower for a long time. Let them, if you have time. If the goal is to encourage curiosity and a connection with nature and community, let them spend time outside doing what interests them.

### Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center** (VKC) works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, [vkc.vumc.org](http://vkc.vumc.org)

### Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, [TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org)

### Other Resources

- **Children & Nature Network**

[www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org) - This website provides research and resources to help every child play, learn, and grow in nature.

- Louv, Richard. (2008). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. New York, NY: Algonquin Books.

- **National Center on Physical Activity and Disability**  
[www.ncpad.org](http://www.ncpad.org) - This website has a number of resources on outdoor activities and accommodations, including a section on "Camping, Backpacking, and Hiking."

- **Nature Rocks**

[www.naturerocks.org](http://www.naturerocks.org) - This website helps families find nature activities in their areas and provides tools and activities to help guide and plan adventures.

- **Tennessee Greenways and Trails**

[connectwithtn.com](http://connectwithtn.com)

- **Tennessee State Parks**

[tnstateparks.com](http://tnstateparks.com)

- Ward, Jennifer. (2008). *I Love Dirt! 52 Activities to Help You and Your Kids Discover the Wonders of Nature*. Boston, MA: Roost Books.

