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continued

The Therapeutic Benefits of Outdoor Play

Presented by:

Angela Hanscom, MOT, OTR/L

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continued

- **Presenter Disclosure:** Financial: Angela Hanscom received an honorarium for presenting this course. Non-financial: Angela Hanscom has no relevant non-financial relationships to disclose.
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continued



Angela Hanscom, MOTR/L

- Pediatric Occupational Therapist
- Founder of TimberNook, an international nature-based program
- Author of *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children*



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Learning Outcomes

- After this course, participants will be able to explain why outdoor play is a valuable and irreplaceable occupation for children.
- After this course, participants will be able to identify at least five therapeutic benefits of outdoor play.
- After this course, participants will be able to recognize the difference between activities and true play experiences and simple tools on how to inspire these in the school and home settings.

4

continued



Outdoor play is an important occupation!

Q1 5

continued

True occupation & true play



- Play is recognized in occupational therapy as a central domain of childhood.
 - Strong evidence of its importance for health, development and well being (Lester and Russell, 2010)
- Play is a choice.
 - Freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, self-directed meaningful occupations
 - About the process of engagement rather than the product (activities vs. experiences)
- Play occupation is the driver of learning in early childhood settings. However, children are not done playing yet when they reach primary school!

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Q2 6

continued

continued



Common play behaviors seen at TimberNook

- Building forts
- Climbing trees
- Society making
- Superhero play
- Rough and tumble
- Total immersion in mud
- Giant ball runs
- Sledding
- Making stores
- Keep away games & “stealing”
- Lots of “heavy work” of loose parts
- Playing house, animals, etc.
- Exploratory play



7

continued



8

continued

continued



Outdoor play is becoming rare

Children today spend far less time outdoors than prior generations did

This is effecting children's healthy sensory development

- Decreased attention
- Posture is changing
- Increased falling
- Rise in anxiety
- Play is changing

Q3

9

continued



Outdoor play during & after the pandemic.

The world has provided most of us with a unique opportunity to slow down and allow for more outdoor play!



10

continued

continued



Nature is the ultimate sensory experience.

**Engages
all the
senses**

**Man-made
versus
natural**

**Calm, but
alert state
of mind**



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Q4 11

continued



The vestibular system

- Uses hair cells in the inner ear complex
- Helps children know where their body is in space
- Supports all six eye muscles for reading and writing
- Maintains the Reticular Activating System, which turns the brain on and allows us to pay attention
- Feeds into the limbic system, the center for emotional regulation



Q5 12

continued

continued

Common ways children stimulate the vestibular sense



- Rolling up and down hills
- Tree climbing
- Sledding
- Spinning in circles
- Mud slides
- Swings

Q6 13

continued



The proprioceptive sense

- Considered “heavy work”
- Push and pull resistive activities

Examples:

Shoveling, building a dam, digging in the dirt, carrying heavy buckets of water



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continued

continued

Playing with loose parts



Large items for
building



Adults step back



Use the
environment as
inspiration

15

15

continued



Loose Parts

- Stones
- Tree cookies
- Bricks
- Fabric
- Logs
- Wood planks
- Gutters
- Pallets
- Baskets
- Egg crates
- Tires
- Dishware
- Tarps
- Buckets



Q7

16

continued



The tactile sense

- Full body engagement
- Multiple senses engaged
- A variety of tactile experiences

Examples:

Going barefoot on a log, playing in mud puddles, climbing a tree, gardening, etc.



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Example: Indoor vs. outdoor



This?



Or this?

18

continued



Example: Sensory bin vs. the natural world



This?



Or this?

19

continued



Social emotional learning

20

continued

continued



Social emotional skills through authentic play

- What is the best way for children to learn social skills?
- Through play with other children!



Q8 21

continued



Child-directed play with others



- Children establish their own rules (snow fight)
- Practice taking on different roles, try new ideas
- When adults step back, they solve own problems
- Practice emotional regulation
- Loose parts support engagement
- Develop empathy

22

continued

continued



23

continued



Case Study 1

- Physical therapist, "you cannot replicate this in therapy!"



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continued



Case Study 2

- Only two days and Noah was being pulled into cooperative play



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Remembering Our Roots



What are our true objectives?

- ✓ Is it meaningful
- ✓ Child-directed
- ✓ Creates change in the child
- ✓ Generalizes easier in “real” environments

Q9 26



Occupational Justice

- Decrease in outdoor play
- Health & well being depends on it
- Restore & enrich the outdoor play experiences of children



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Providing more opportunities for outdoor play

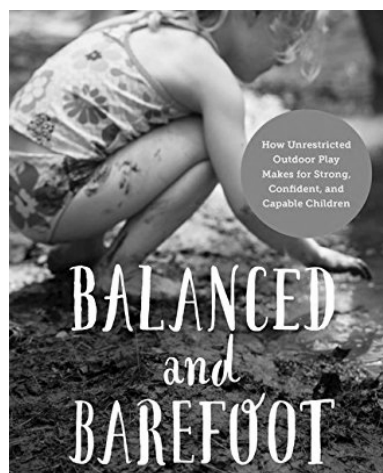
- Advocating for longer recess sessions for increased engagement, regulation, social skills
- Promote more outdoor play experiences both at home and at school.
- Taking therapy outdoors!



Q10

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Where to find more?



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