

**“Children  
think better on  
their feet than  
their seat”**


*Mark Benden*

**Mary MacKenzie, Senior  
Fellow, ICS**



A young child with light hair, wearing a pink t-shirt with a blue bear graphic and striped sleeves, is playing with bubbles in a field of tall, dry grass. The child has their mouth wide open in a joyful expression and is pointing upwards with both hands. Two large, clear bubbles are suspended in the air above the child's head. The background is a dense field of tall, golden-brown grass. The overall scene is bright and cheerful, capturing a moment of pure childhood joy.

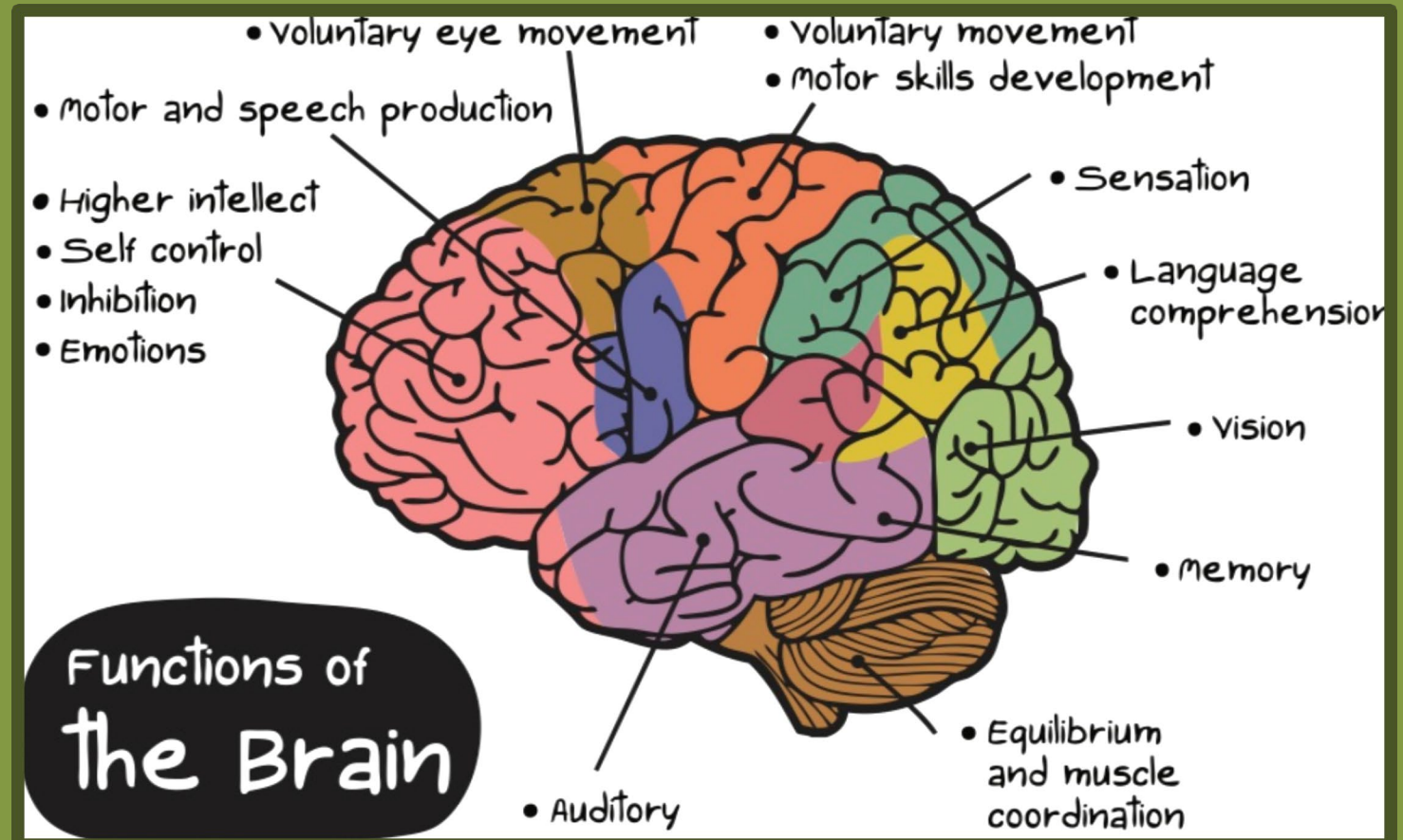
# HOW OUTDOOR PLAY IMPROVES MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



**“Children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier, when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the outdoors.”**

**American Medical Association**

# Brain Development





**It's  
human  
nature!**



- **Being outside in natural sunlight allows body to produce Vitamin D which releases serotonin**
- **This helps regulate emotion and mood and is linked with happiness and relief from depression**
- **Helps relieve stress and anxiety by reducing the hormone cortisol in the brain**



- **Exercise cues the building blocks of learning in the brain and is the single most powerful tool to optimize brain function**

*Ratey & Hagerman (2008)*



# Nature Deficit Disorder

Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) states that human beings, especially children are spending less time outdoors resulting in a wide range of behavioural problems.

*Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods*

*Photo: Barnkids Uk, 2019*





*"I don't have  
ADHD when I'm  
out in the woods"*

Toniah age 11 years







## **Behaviour:**

### **Outdoor learning can help children to:-**

- Understand and experience their emotions**
- Learn to interact successfully with peers**
- Experience calm and relaxation through reflection**
- Build self confidence and concentration**
- Improve co-ordination and self esteem**
- Have fun and and escape their fears and anxieties**



# What research is telling us .....

## Playing outdoors promotes

- ▶ Language and cooperative skills
- ▶ Emotional wellbeing and behaviour
- ▶ Creativity, physical health and motor skills
- ▶ Imagination and a sense of wonder
- ▶ Problem solving skills
- ▶ Observational skills and knowledge of the world



# The impact of nature on children's health

*Contact with nature can be seen as part of a “balanced diet” of childhood experiences*





# RESILIENCE:

## WHAT CHILDREN REALLY NEED

- *Other children*
- *Natural World*
- *Challenge and risk taking*
- *Playing with identity*
- *Movement*
- *Rough and tumble*
- *Using their senses (7)*



**Building  
friendships:**





***“Children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make the top of any conservationist’s list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom”***

**Tim Gill**





# CURRENT RESEARCH EVIDENCE:

- ▶ Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam, UK 2017
- ▶ James and Williams 2017
- ▶ Mark Benden, Texas A&M University





***“The memories made as a child stay with you forever, and if outdoor places are part of these memories, then hopefully children will grow up wanting to protect these special places for years to come”***

Helen Meech from  
Outdoors and Nature  
Engagement







## References

- ▶ Murray R & O'Brien L, (2005) An evaluation of Forest School in England, NEF and Forest Research
- ▶ Edwards S, Outreach Education Coordinator Surrey Wildlife Trust.
- ▶ Meech, H from Outdoors and Nature Engagement
- ▶ Nutbrown, C., (2012) Review of Early Education and Childcare Qualifications: Interim Report . London. Department for Education DfE.
- ▶ Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam, UK 2016-2017
- ▶ Mark Benden, Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health Texas A&M University
- ▶ James and Williams, 2017