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## The Lost Wonder of Being Outside, Running Free and Exploring

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## The Lost Wonder of Being Outside, Running Free and Exploring

By Kim Nassoiy

UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, September 27, 2017

As I write this, I am sitting outside in 90-degree heat after Hurricane Irma swept through our beautiful state and left millions without power.

I am forced outside, seeking a breeze, but I have found a certain peace, as well. I live in rural east Orange County and am surrounded by green forests and pasture lands. While I might prefer to view this from the comfort of my air-conditioned house, I need the view nonetheless.

Research abounds now regarding the healing power of green spaces.

Whether it is to alleviate symptoms in children with sensory issues or ADHD or to improve mental fatigue in adults, researchers are recommending more time in the outdoors. Children can improve their physical health, as well as their ability to focus and develop executive functioning skills. While research shows decreased rates of heart disease, stroke and depression in adults. Both children and adults who spend time outside have better coping skills for stressful situations. Researchers acknowledge the change in the sedentary American lifestyle in the past four to five decades and the rise of these health conditions.

As we spend more time on work and school, we spend less time on leisure activities. When we do relax, our leisure times more often find us inside watching TV, playing video games and using our electronics.

I am not an opponent of technology. I enjoy the usefulness and entertainment as much as the next person.

However, when I was a child, my recreation time involved playing outside with my neighbors and siblings. There was always a game of kickball, hide-and-seek or freeze tag to be found. If no one was around, we might ride bikes or climb trees.

Sitting inside the house was not a fun option. We were imagining, risk-taking and problem-solving – and needed the outdoors for this to happen.

Many of today's children have lost the wonder of being outside, running free and exploring. Their green spaces are few. Homes are bigger; yards are smaller.

At UCF's Creative School for Children, for pupils up to age 5, the staff tries to counteract this growing disconnect between children and nature. The school is committed to using the natural world as a component of learning by offering outside activities along with classroom programs.

Outside, the children can discover and explore at a variety of interactive elements such as butterfly and vegetable gardens, nature art, movement, climbing, and a dirt-digging and "messy materials" area. The school last year was certified as a Nature Explore Classroom along with more than 320 other programs around the country.

And as adults, we still want natural spaces. Otherwise, conservation lots – that help preserve an area's natural beauty and minimize the impact of development – wouldn't be sold for a premium. Builders are adding community parks to neighborhood designs, but are we using them? Children, and adults alike, need to spend time outdoors. Take advantage of these opportunities.

It will do us all a little good to be in a green space and slow life down. My hope is that you, too, will experience the tranquility of nature.

*Kim Nassoij is the interim director of UCF's Creative School for Children. She can be reached at [Kimberly.Nassoij@ucf.edu](mailto:Kimberly.Nassoij@ucf.edu).*