How to Create a Safe, Sensory-Friendly Backyard Landscape for Your Child With Special Needs

BY DANIELLE BRADLEY | FEBRUARY 24TH, 2020 | BLOG, HOME & GARDEN, LANDSCAPING

Playing outside is one of the greatest joys of childhood. Stepping out the back door into sunlight, fresh air, and freedom can provide a feeling of liberation unlike any other. There are extra considerations when your child has special needs, but time outside still can offer tremendous therapeutic benefits, especially for children with autism or similar conditions that may keep them confined indoors in highly structured, climate-controlled environments for most of the day.

If you're looking to create a safe and sensory-friendly outdoor sanctuary where your children can enjoy themselves and learn through nature-based sensory play, it's imperative first to approach the design and construction with an understanding of your child's specific needs — including sensory, cognitive, visual, or auditory impairments, as well as issues with fine and gross motor skills.

All kids need a safe environment in which to get loud, be physically active, and burn off excess energy. The best safe and secure spaces outdoors offer features that safely accommodate all levels of capability and energy.

This guide will focus on techniques to use in creating a sensory-friendly backyard environment for your child with special needs. You can design a haven that offers plenty of fun, physically stimulating activities to engage all the senses. At the same time, you can take steps to anticipate and address accessibility barriers, common behavioral and environmental risks, and potential safety hazards.

6 Benefits of Outdoor Play for Children With Special Needs

You might wonder, what's the point of creating an outdoor space for my child? Are the potential benefits worth the work? Yes, they overwhelmingly are, says pediatric occupational therapist Christine Sadecki. "Outdoor play can address many challenges for children with sensory processing disorders and/or autism. It can be calming or alerting." Studies show hands-on sensory play can help kids operating on the autism spectrum or experiencing low vision, as well as those working to develop fine motor skills.

for children with sensory processing disorder or autism." Playing outdoors helps promote kids' strong, sustained, physical development in a number of ways:

1. Improves vision

Many children with autism face vision issues, such as a lazy eye or crossed eyes. A study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders found that 40% of children with autism and related conditions have some type of issue with their eyes.

Visual stimulation can help children with autism and kids with low vision improve their understanding of what's around them and feel more comfortable with their surroundings. Outdoor landscapes can offer a variety of visual stimuli not available indoors, from flowers and trees to the sky overhead. And they can offer the added benefit of helping even a child with visual impairment become familiar with more organic shapes and colors than are found in manufactured environments.

2. Increases attention spans

Because there's more to see outdoors, there are more reasons for your child to stay engaged. Did you see that bird that just flew past? What was that in the bushes? A squirrel? The wind makes the trees seem to dance as it rustles through the leaves.

Outdoor environments are constantly changing, constantly inviting engagement and attention. Just being out in nature can increase a child's attention span, and there's more room on your back lawn to create new adventures than the indoors could ever provide.

3. Boosts vitamin D levels

The sun's ultraviolet rays can stimulate the production of vitamin D. Why is this important? Vitamin D helps the body absorb the calcium it requires to maintain strong bones. It's also important to muscles and nerves, and it's part of the immune system's defense against viruses and bacteria.

You can find vitamin D in food supplements, although the most direct source is sunlight. Be sure, though, that your child is protected from the sun if they're outside for an extended period. The body can only produce so much vitamin D at one time, and spending prolonged periods outside without protection can increase the risk of skin cancer. For kids with sensory issues, try using fast-application sprays or sun-protective clothing.

4. Sharpens motor fitness, agility, balance, and coordination

Kids need to develop gross motor skills — the kind they need to walk, jump, and climb — before they can learn to master finer motor skills that require more patience, such as holding a pencil or opening a package. Developing gross motor skills is no easy task. If you've ever seen a child learning to walk, you know the amount of concentration and physical effort it takes.

A backyard lawn can give your child a big, safe place to exercise these skills. A large, flat surface with a soft landing space is a lot better than a hazardous environment such as a staircase or a hard tile floor. An accessible space outdoors provides your child with a safe, fun place to develop balance and coordination.

5. Increases overall levels of physical activity

The more room your child has to roam, and the safer the environment, the more she'll be able to exercise. It's as simple as that. And the more exercise she gets, the more physically fit she'll be overall.

This is important because children with autism are at higher risk of obesity than other kids. They also face greater challenges when it comes to balancing or catching a ball because they pay more attention to their own muscles than to watching what's happening around them. Having a safe backyard play area gives them the space they need to work on their motor skills, while at the same time keeping them physically fit.

6. Offers cognitive, mental, social and emotional benefits, such as:

- **Enhancing imagination, creativity, and sense of wonder.** For years, stories including "Winnie-the-Pooh," "The Hobbit," and "Where the Wild Things Are" have transported children's minds out of their bedrooms and into the great outdoors, where they can marvel at secret gardens, fantastic forests, and hidden worlds filled with curious animals and marvelous mysteries. Why not create a real world of wonder for them, right in your own backyard?
- **Augmenting the abilities to observe, learn, and concentrate.** Blackboards and desks are fine, but your child's experience can be so much richer if your backyard is a truly interactive classroom. It's important for students to learn about the natural world in the pages of books and from the mouths of teachers, but the impact is greater and longer-lasting when that world itself teaches our children in its own way, through direct experience. Hands-on learning can make information come alive for youngsters, and a backyard classroom is a perfect place for that to happen.
- **Reinforcing interpersonal skills, collaboration, and language development.** What's that? It's a beetle! And that flower over there? It's an iris. Kids can learn the names of things by seeing them up close, making the connection between sight and verbal cues. And they can work together with patient, loving parents to learn the importance of respecting nature as they begin to understand what it takes to plant and maintain a garden, interact with other creatures, recognize natural resources, and support the ecology that maintains all life on this planet, their home.

foundation of physiological needs being met first and safety being assured. Once kids feel safe and loved, they can develop a sense of self-esteem that empowers their natural inclination to learn and explore.

How to Create a Safe Backyard Sanctuary

Credit: Airman 1st Class Dennis Sloan

Safety is, of course, the paramount consideration when designing and creating play and learning environments for any kids. Extra measures must be taken when designing outdoor spaces to accommodate children with special needs.

Your backyard landscape will consist of living and nonliving elements. The first is called softscape, comprising primarily horticultural elements: grass, flowers, trees, plants, hedges, vegetable gardens, and so forth. Nonliving or hardscape elements, by contrast, can include the following:

- Benches
- Retaining walls
- Walkways
- Patios
- Fences
- Decks

- Fountains
- Bird feeders and birdbaths

It's important to incorporate both softscape and hardscape elements when designing an outdoor play space for your child with special needs.

Accessibility and safety considerations to keep in mind include:

Build or widen walkways to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers. According to the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), pathways should be at least 6 inches wider than a wheelchair, or a total of 36 inches. Entries and gates should be at least 32 inches wide.

Emphasize the openness of the outdoors. Even if your child does not use a wheelchair, pathways should be wide to emphasize the feeling of openness and freedom a garden can provide. This is not a place to feel cramped or crowded. It's an expansive place to explore! Still, paths should have clear boundaries, so your child knows where the walkway ends and the garden begins. If your child is sensitive to light, install non-glare surfaces and make sure they're smooth and easy to navigate.

Add wheelchair ramps. ADA standards require that the grade for wheelchair accessibility ramps rise no more steeply than 5% — and, at most, 2% at entrances and steps.

Eliminate surprises. Visual aids and signs can help children with special needs feel secure. If they are nonverbal, a system of pictures can help them feel safe. A child who feels lost can grow anxious and worried, and he won't feel safe enough to explore and enjoy his backyard wonderland. Make sure they always know where they are and consider creating orientation maps to help them get where they want to go next, easily and directly.

Install handrails or handholds along paths, on decks, and in seating areas. Handrails should be installed on both sides of a pathway. When installing handrails for kids, the ADA calls for heights to be measured at a 90-degree angle from directly above the walking surface. Handrails shouldn't be more than 28 inches high and should be at least 9 inches apart so kids don't trap their heads or hands between the uprights.

Install tactile features on or alongside walkways. Tactile features include raised bumps, lines, and patterns. They aren't to help traction. Instead, they accommodate special needs by helping those with impaired vision know when they've entered a new path or they're about to leave the path they've been on.

Strive for consistency. Once you've created the layout of your backyard, keep it constant. Try not to change the location of a bench, water fountain, or bird feeder, for example, unless it's necessary for safety or functionally essential reasons. Once a child is familiar with his surroundings, you can make small, incremental changes to challenge them as part of the learning process. Children with special needs feel safer when they know what to expect. They'll blossom in an environment they know they can count on.

Create transitions. Gradual transitions are much easier for children with special needs to process than abrupt changes. Give them space and time between activities, and provide them with visual and verbal cues to alert them when something new is about to happen. Preparing kids for change helps them accept it and feel safer than springing a new situation or activity on them without warning.

Enclose play areas with fencing or railings. It's important to make your backyard as safe as possible. One study found that nearly half of children on the autism spectrum wander from a safe place at some point. Enclosures can help keep this from occurring. Fences improve safety by keeping children from wandering into an area where they shouldn't be, like a flowerbed or hedge. They also can help them stay focused on the adventure you've created. Fences should be at least 5 feet high and shouldn't provide handholds that kids can use to climb. Smooth surfaces are best.

Label play areas with Braille or textures to help a child with low vision find the location they'll be visiting next or the activity you've planned for them.

Features to add, hazards to avoid

Features worth adding can include:

- Surfaces and structures specialized to accommodate use with various mobility aids or other equipment
- Play structures and platforms at a variety of heights
- Secluded, safe spaces for retreat, like an enclosed playhouse, pod or tube

Hazards to avoid:

- Plants that can be toxic or cause allergic reactions; or plants that could puncture or scratch skin
- Surfaces that provide uneven footing, or falling or tripping hazards
- Reflective elements that exacerbate glare or bright-light issues

Sensory Activities That Can be Enjoyed in Your Backyard

According to the STAR Institute, kids with conditions that hinder them from readily processing sensory input may have a hard time knowing where their body is in space. The results can include poor posture, weakness, motion sickness, awkwardness, and clumsiness. So it's important to identify the sensory activities that can best help your kids learn, improve their motor skills, and focus on their environment without getting frustrated or distracted. Here are a few sensory play ideas for backyard activities designed to engage your child's senses:

Touch

Hands-on sensory-based play is one of the best ways to capture a child's attention and provide much-needed tactile sensory input.

Swinging: Nearly all kids love to swing, and the benefits include an enhanced response to proprioception, better coordination and balance, stronger muscles, and a boost in positive mood. A repetitive back-and-forth motion also can be soothing and calming for kids with autism.

Sadecki, the pediatric occupational therapist, recommends careful attention and assessment to help your child get the most out of swinging: "Swings stimulate the fluid in the inner ear, which activates the vestibular senses. It lets your child know they are moving, and it can also impact the brain's ability to process and use sensory information in their environment.

"However, the amount of vestibular input needed varies by child," explains Sadecki. "Some crave movement to feel more centered in order to focus and attend to the world around them. Others may be movement-sensitive, which makes things difficult such as riding in a car, so swinging can be used to help desensitize them to movement. Vestibular input as part of a sensory diet should be monitored by an occupational therapist."

Water activities: Water is a versatile element that offers so many hands-on sensory possibilities, limited only by your imagination.

- Your child can play with foam "noodle" boats made from cut-up pool noodles, with foam sheets serving as sails and straws for masts. They're easy to make with just some scissors and a hole punch. Watching the boats float in a pan of water under the warm glow of the sun can be relaxing and boost concentration. (NOTE: For kids with light sensitivity, eye protection may be necessary to guard against the dazzling glare of sun on water.)
- You can set up a toy car wash using nothing more than a pan with some soapy water. Put some toy cars in the water and give your child a brush to wash them.
- Create a bubble rainbow water activity for your child using dish soap and some food coloring or liquid watercolors. A large pan of water can become a canvas for your child's imagination, a kaleidoscope of swirling, changing colors to keep her occupied and focused.
- Have your child squeeze some pom poms. Place the pom poms in water, then let him watch them absorb it. When they're soaked, he can squeeze them out into containers until the containers are full.

Playing in sand and soil: Who says you need the beach to build sandcastles? With a bag of sand and a little water in a small enclosure, that can happen right in your backyard! Otherwise, your child can enjoy the fun of getting their hands dirty by digging and planting in soil.

Sight

Clouds: Invite your child to lie down in the grass with you and stare up at the clouds as they pass by. What shapes does she see? What do they remind her of?

Leaves: Collect fallen leaves with her and point out their different shapes, as well as the colorful reds and golds and oranges they turn in autumn. Look for birds that share their various colors. Study the effects of wind and water after a spring rain.

shooting stars you and your child can count.

Scavenger hunt: For a more-organized activity, consider a scavenger hunt. Remember how much fun you had getting up early on Easter Sunday for an egg hunt? See how many things your child can find in your backyard. Give him a list and accompany him on his quest for specific plants, birds, animals or perhaps for items you have hidden.

Treasure hunt: Another possibility is a treasure hunt. Get your child a special treat and hide it in the garden, then make a pirate's map and help her follow it to discover the secret treasure.

Sound

Bird calls/ insect sounds: Help your child become conscious of sounds we often miss in the background (or take for granted) by listening for bird calls and insect sounds. What does a blue jay sound like? What about a crow, a lark or a sparrow? That high-pitched humming is a cicada; let's see if we can find it! What's that rapid rat-a-tat-tat coming from that tree trunk over there. Could it be a woodpecker? Learn about birds and insects yourself. You might want to pick up a book on birdwatching that identifies different species in your area, or listen to recordings of bird calls online. Then point out which birds and insects make which sounds and help your child learn to identify them.

Taste

Garden flavors: Plant a vegetable garden or fruit trees and let your child taste what you're growing there. What does a tomato taste like? A strawberry? An apple? You can illustrate the concept of growing food like this: Accompany your kids around your garden and pick samples from vines and trees, showing them the difference between ripe and unripe fruit. Wash the fruit off with then and prepare it as part of a sandwich or simple meal, then make a picnic trip back out to the yard and eat it underneath the tree that shared its fruit with you. Your children will be able to follow the journey of the meal you've created from tree to table — or, in this case, picnic basket.

Smell

Nature's aromas: Help your child learn to recognize the many smells of your yard by getting close to the source of each scent. Let them sniff different flowers and herbs, saying the name for each so they can associate the word with the smell. And this goes for not-so-pleasant outdoor smells, too: Help them find the wild onions, or sniff the recently spread mulch. In other seasons, point out the crisp, clean scent of snow, or that particularly lovely scent in the air just after a spring rain begins.

Multiple senses

Sensory garden: You can engage all your child's senses by creating a sensory garden. Include plants that will attract wildlife like crickets, buzzing bees, and chirping birds; maybe plant some bamboo stems so your child can hear the sound they make in the wind. Set up a birdbath or birdhouse to attract some feathered friends or a hummingbird feeder for those faster-than-the-eye-can see winged wonders. Water fountains and wind chimes can enhance your child's auditory experience, too.

Find plants with fragrant scents such as gardenia and honeysuckle, as well as those with a variety of tactile sensations, from moss to jade trees to lamb's ear. (No roses, cacti or other thorny plants, though!). Also, seek out plants with a variety of forms, from creeping vines to woody stems to soft grasses.

Consider dividing these sensory-friendly environments into two areas — one for playtime and another for relaxing and unwinding. If you can, put brightly colored flowers with red or yellow petals in one area of the garden, and provide a shaded area in the other. A pergola or shade trees can provide a haven from the bright sun and vivid colors that provide stimulation but can be overstimulating if your child doesn't have a calm place of refuge in which to retreat.

Another possibility: an outdoor speaker system that plays soothing background music on occasion. Just don't leave it on all the time. You want your child to notice the natural sounds all around her in your backyard.

To help your child feel at ease, think about creating a theme for your garden that she'll enjoy: maybe a fairytale character, a favorite game, or an animal.

Activity Ideas for Children With Different Diagnoses

The best outdoor spaces are inclusive, welcoming kids and grown-ups alike with a variety of capabilities, considerations, and objectives. When designing a backyard play space, keep in mind any of your child's special requirements and build in features to accommodate them. Here are some elements to consider for safe sensory learning environments for kids with different conditions:

For kids who are easily overstimulated

- Secluded, safe spaces provide relief from overwhelming sights and sounds. Look into which fences or plants work best to block out sound from neighbors' houses, busy streets, and other sources of noise. Brick walls and modular fences, for example, offer much better sound insulation than wooden fencing. Consider a playhouse furnished with pillows to absorb some of the excess sound while also providing refuge and comfort.
- "Cocoon" swings or other therapeutically designed swings allow the swinging sensation without the accompanying visual overstimulation. These swings are like a middle ground between a playground swing and a hammock. Anyone who's ever spent a leisurely afternoon lying in a backyard hammock knows how soothing it can be. Cocoon swings not only reduce the amount of sensory stimulation coming in from both sides, but they also give the child a feeling of being hugged securely and feeling safe.
- Quiet pleasures like picnics, watching clouds, reading, and tending a garden can be soothing alternatives to high-energy activities.

For kids who are visually impaired

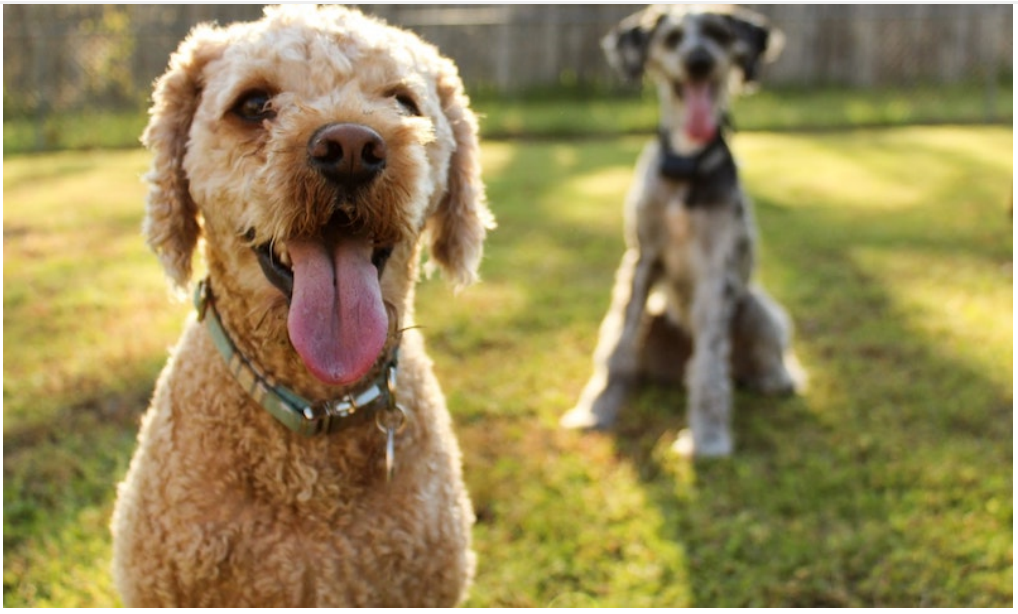
- Enclosed play areas offer a physical boundary around the play space, adding to an "I'm in the right place" sense of security.
- Level and even walking surfaces make it easier for kids to move around without fear of tripping or stumbling.
- Signs and labels in Braille are helpful tools in enabling children to interpret and navigate their surroundings.

For wheelchair users

- Wide, even walkways enhance wheel mobility and guard against tipping over or falling.
- Shallow ramps with side rails and no more than a 1:12 slope allow safe and easy ascents, as well as descents without gaining too much speed.
- Play stations on raised platforms can bring games, projects, and other learning opportunities up to a convenient height for a child in a wheelchair.
- Platform swings and wheelchair merry-go-rounds, key elements of the growing trend toward "inclusive playgrounds," allow a child to roll their wheelchair right on, clip or strap in, and enjoy swinging or spinning safely.

For kids who experience seizures

- Soft surfaces with "give" can prevent head injuries in case of a fall. Concrete isn't a good idea, and neither are stone pathways — even more so if they're uneven. Wood mulch is more forgiving. There are several types of surfaces engineered to absorb impact, but a natural grass lawn can be optimal because it cushions falls, reducing the risk of injury. Guides to safe playground designs are available from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.
- Shallow water features less than 2 inches deep are best to prevent drowning hazards. If you have a swimming pool, be sure to have it fenced off on all sides and keep it locked when not in use.
- Ample space should accommodate companions engaging in side-by-side activity. One-on-one activities help kids focus while their companions guide them, without distractions from others.



Troubleshooting Common Issues

Eloping

Most people think of eloping as running away to get married, but the word literally just means to run, or lope, outward. In the case of children with special needs, it indicates wandering or running away from a caregiving environment — and it's a common hazard for people on the autism spectrum.

"Studies show that 50% of kids with autism spectrum disorder elope, but it is still unclear as to why," says Sadecki. "Many parents believe that their child simply enjoys running and exploring, but it could also be because they are escaping anxious or overstimulating sensory situations."

The more strongly children are impacted by autism, the more likely they may be to elope. Parenting styles aren't a factor; most parents in a survey about the phenomenon said their child just enjoyed running and exploring.

This makes it all the more important to provide plenty of sensory stimuli for children with autism. The more you give them to explore right in their own backyard, the more likely they are to stay focused on the adventures you're providing — and the less likely they will be to wander off.

Even so, it's important to repair or install continuous fencing, as well as out-of-reach locks or latches on gates and doors to keep your kids inside where they belong. As mentioned before, this is particularly important if you have a pool. Secure fencing and locking gates are important for all young children. Similar gates and fences should be in place around other potentially hazardous areas, such as dog runs, thorny bushes, or rock gardens.

Pet waste

Stepping in poo is a perfect way to start a meltdown. Minimize the possibility of your child's coming into contact with pet waste (which is toxic in some cases and unpleasant in all cases) by designating a separate area for your pet, and/or diligently picking up after their bathroom time.

Plastic bags and pooper-scoopers can make this odious (and odorous) task a little more painless. There are even high-tech, dog poop vacuums that pull up pet waste, which can then be ejected into a trash bag or toilet.

Fertilizer

Fertilizer can be an irritant — a toxic one, if it contains pesticides or other chemicals. Use fertilizer according to the directions and keep it contained appropriately when not in use. Don't assume a fertilizer is safe for kids just because it's labeled as "organic" or "natural." Also be aware that fertilizers in powder form can drift into other areas on a windy day, so apply them when the air is calm and be sure to sweep any excess away from paths and other areas your child might frequent.

Standing water

Standing water not only invites messes, just waiting for kids to reach or step in, but it also can be a health hazard, depending on the organisms growing in it. If left around long enough, pools of standing water can attract breeding mosquitoes. Take care to empty any uncovered containers with standing water in them. If you find standing water remaining at a low spot in your yard for any length of time, make sure you find a way to drain it away.

Prickly or toxic plants can puncture skin with spines, cause rashes with irritating secretions, initiate a sneezing fit with pollen, or poison a person who ingests any part of them. Make sure your outdoor area is free of poison ivy, poison oak, stinging nettle, and other allergenic plants.

How do you recognize toxic plants? Poison ivy and poison oak each have three leaves growing off a main leaf stem (giving rise to the saying, "leaves in three, let it be.") Their leaves also alternate on the stem or branch, never growing directly across from one another. Stinging nettle leaves are heart-shaped, prickly-looking, and tapered at the end.

Plants can be poisonous in two ways: They can irritate the skin if touched, or they can be toxic if ingested. Some very pretty plants, including oleander and monkshood, can be dangerous. Be sure you have a medical kit. You can look up information from the American Association of Poison Control Centers, or call Poison Control at (800) 222-1222 if you think your child has eaten a toxic plant.

Also be on the lookout for mushrooms, which aren't technically plants, but fungi. Those with scales, warts or white (not brown) gills are likely to be hazardous. Other red flags: a bulb-shaped base, or a ring around the upper or lower stem. The vast majority of mushrooms aren't toxic, but it's better to be safe than sorry. If you notice mushrooms in your yard, remove them immediately.

Move cactus, agave, and other spiny plants out of traffic areas. Keep fencing around rose gardens so kids can't wander or stumble into their thorns.

Loud noises

Loud noises are a potential problem outside, where barking dogs, heavy equipment, or a backfiring car nearby can trigger a child's noise sensitivity. Creating areas buffered from ambient noise with fences, walls, high bushes, or shrubs can help protect your child from overstimulation by sound.

In an age when kids are often glued to their phones or gaming systems indoors, an outdoor adventure can be (literally) a breath of fresh air. Sadecki says electronics should be limited for all children, especially those with special needs. "There have been lots of recent studies done that have shown the impact of too much electronics on kids. Children who spend more than 2 hours a day on electronics are more likely to have emotional, social, and attention problems. They also develop shorter attention spans because their brain develops the need for constant stimulation by bright, fast-paced programming. It makes it more difficult for them to connect to and focus on people and things in their environment that don't provide that constant stimulation."

We as adults often spend most of our days indoors, too, whether we're working at the office or around the house, and it's easy to forget how important it can be to get out of the house. The outdoors can be a forgotten resource to check our worries at the back door and enter a land of refreshment and adventure.

Adults need a break from highly structured indoor settings, and so do children with special needs. Why not offer them a safe backyard playground with an expansive lawn and fascinating sights, sounds and smells to explore? It will open up a whole new world to them. And that can make a world of difference!

Source links:

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280948490_Sachs_N_Vincenta_T_2011_April_Outdoor_environments_for_children_with_autism_and_special_needs_Implications_91_1-7
- https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1110016818302072
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All the tips in this article were reviewed by licensed pediatric occupational therapist Christine Sadecki, OTR/L, owner of Reach for the Stars Therapy Services, LLC, in Lake Worth, FL. The strategies reflect widely accepted therapeutic practices, however, for specific advice, you should always consult a medical professional.