

WHY DO AGES 0 TO 5 MATTER SO MUCH?

In the earliest years of life, your child's brain is making the most connections for learning, language, knowledge and skills. Every child at this age is like a sponge, absorbing information and experiences, then starting to form understanding and skills.

The image below shows how at age 6, a child's brain is full of connections that have developed and strengthened from birth. It also shows how extra connections, or connections that are not used, are cut back by the time children reach the teenage years. The connections that are kept and strengthened in the teenage years are built on those made in childhood. When children have more variety of experiences in young childhood, they have a better foundation of connections for their teenage years and as adults.

SYNAPTIC PRUNING (DENSITY)¹²

AT BIRTH



6 YEARS OLD



14 YEARS OLD





Outdoor play is a key way to offer this variety of experiences. This will build the foundation of their physical skills (jumping, falling, balancing, running) and their understanding of the world around them (gravity, textures, physics, cause and effect). Outdoor play is the building block to life-long skills, knowledge and sense of self in the world.

Remember, your role is to offer permission, time, space and materials to play. This will help children form those connections and gain skills.

To help children deepen their experiences and make more connections, you can use a “serve and return” approach, which is sort of like a tennis game. You watch what a child “serves” or shows they are interested in, then “return” it to them by naming and describing the object or skill, making the object available or helping develop a skill.

For more information see albertafamilywellness.org
or developingchild.harvard.edu

This content forms part of a larger booklet entitled “Why Outdoor Play Matters for Children: A practical guide for parents and caregivers”. To see the full booklet, and references, please go to recreationns.ns.ca.