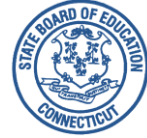




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



To: Superintendents of Schools

From: John D. Frassinelli, Division Director
Office of Student Support Services

Date: May 11, 2026

Subject: Mental Health Awareness Month: *Get Outside and Play for Children's Mental Health Day*

Since 1949, the month of May has been designated as National Mental Health Awareness Month. As part of the continuing efforts to support children's mental health, in 2022 Governor Ned Lamont declared May 26th of each year to be Get Outside and Play for Children's Mental Health Day. The goal of this day is to raise awareness of concerns related to children's mental health, as well as promote and educate children and families on the benefits of outdoor activities on children's mental health and wellness.

A simple way to improve youth mental health is by spending more time outdoors. According to the [Kids Mental Health Foundation](#), time outside can:

- Help with stress, anxiety and mood
- Increase physical activity
- Improve focus
- Support social skills
- Improve sleep quality
- Enhance creativity
- Improve resilience and confidence

A [2021 study of adolescents](#) found subjective well-being (SWB) to be strongly associated with outdoor play and nature-based activities, indicating these activities can mediate declines in SWB and play a key role in resilience to stressors for youth. An earlier [2017 study](#) reported associations between positive mental health and better access to green spaces, including parks and other areas with a nature focus and recreational activities.

As schools continue to support students' emotional well-being, school leaders are encouraged to consider strategies that incorporate outdoor experiences and opportunities for play. Efforts should be inclusive of all students, regardless of ability or prior experience with physical activity. Here are ten ways that schools can observe Get Outside and Play for Children's Mental Health Day!

1. **Outdoor Classroom Time:** Encourage teachers to take lessons outside—even for part of a class period. Fresh air and a change in environment can improve focus and reduce stress.

2. **Nature Walks:** Have students walk outside to reset and decompress or have students walk in pairs or small groups while discussing prompts or checking in.
3. **Nature Journaling:** Students can write, draw, or reflect on what they see and feel outdoors.
4. **Outdoor Art Projects:** Use sidewalk chalk, natural materials, or painting to encourage creativity outside.
5. **School Gardening:** Planting flowers or vegetables teaches responsibility and provides calming, hands-on engagement.
6. **“Kindness Rocks” or Positive Message Walks:** Students create and place positive messages around school grounds.
7. **Outdoor Yoga or Stretch Breaks:** Simple movement or yoga sessions can help regulate mood and reduce anxiety.
8. **Unstructured Play Time:** Provide extra recess or free-play periods. Unstructured time supports social connection and emotional regulation.
9. **Cooperative Games:** Focus on teamwork-based activities rather than competition to build connection.
10. **Schoolwide Outdoor Events:** Host a field day, wellness fair, or “Get Outside and Play” day to build excitement and participation.

Additional and Complementary Resources:

- Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection- No Child Left Inside. This is a statewide initiative focused on getting families outdoors for health and environmental awareness. It offers outdoor skill-building programs, family engagement events, and access to parks and nature programming. Please feel free to share the lists of activities, events and programs which are free and open to all. For more information, please visit: [No Child Left Inside® | Connecticut State Parks and Forests](#)
- The American Psychological Association’s research is advancing understanding of how time in nature can improve mental health and sharpen cognition. Read the research at: [Nurtured by nature.](#)

If you have any questions regarding the Get Outside and Play for Children’s Mental Health Day initiative, please contact Kate Bohannon at Kate.Bohannon@ct.gov.

JDF:cb