

Kids Love the Dirt

By Dr. Jenn Ripepi, The Choosy Pediatrician

Not just Pigpen, Charlie Brown's pal. Kids like squishing their boots in the mud, digging in the sand and finding bugs on the ground. There is so much to see when you get down and dirty. There may be more benefits to it than first meets the eye.

Dirt Makes You Feel Good

There is an organism called *Mycobacterium vaccae* that has been found to increase serotonin production. Serotonin is one of the "feel good" brain chemicals. Feeling good from being exposed to organisms in dirt? Who knew, right?

Gardeners also feel less stress from the actions of gardening. Being in the natural light has been shown to improve mood especially in those who exhibit symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder--the winter blues. Just being outdoors can make you feel better! The work involved also helps to decrease muscle tension, as long as good technique is used. That means lifting with your legs and not your back, stretching often and using tools appropriately.

Dirt Helps Things Grow

Gardeners also like to reap the rewards of their efforts. Vegetable gardeners will tend to eat fresh and flavorful produce. Fruits like strawberries can be grown in small spaces which makes them easily available to lots of people. Flowers bring beauty and beneficial insects along with lovely visitors like butterflies and hummingbirds. Herbs have unique fragrances and flavors when they are fresh and can also have health benefits.

Get Started in the Dirt

So what can you do to get gardening and reap these rewards? A simple start is to purchase a dish garden and find a good spot for it to get the correct light, follow the watering directions, and enjoy. Want to try a bit more? Get a packet of lettuce seeds, potting soil and a pot. A sunny spot, water as directed and soon you'll have salad greens growing. If you have more experience, try larger pots or a small sunny corner of cleared ground in which you can plant flowers, herbs and/or vegetables. How about a community garden? If your neighborhood has one, you can learn a lot from the experienced gardeners. And those who grow gardens tend to be generous with sharing seeds, plants, produce and flowers along with tips for getting growing.

So all-in-all gardening can be good for you, good for your family and fun for the kids. Maybe they'll learn to like a new food. Maybe they'll learn to appreciate the beauty of plants. Maybe they'll spend more time outside and away from the TV. Maybe they'll learn a bit of patience. Or maybe they'll just be happy getting dirty!