



MEDIA RELEASE

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OUTDOORS FUN IS COOL FOR KIDS!

Hopefully, by the time parents are reading this summer will have finally arrived and that will mean children can enjoy a wonderful alternative to being slouched on the couch – playing outdoors.

For anyone around the 50 years old mark recollections of summer holidays include a backdrop of outdoor play in gardens, backyards, parks and fields.

It wasn't so cool to hang around in the latest fashion gear when you were 12, 13 or 14. Garment labels were worn on the inside because they bore the names of Army and Navy or St Michael and more often than not your clothes had your name or the name of your elder brother or sister stitched on the inside.

OK, the ill-secured rope swing over the stream broke occasionally or you

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just got silly and let go; the odd window was broken during a cricket 'test match'; children often arrived home looking like extras from a Just William story; and the football match often annoyed old 'Old Grumpy' down the road.

But it's likely that you can at least remember being outside and being energetic even though few children ran around thinking 'this is doing me the power of good and I'll be thankful when I'm 50'.

Not so many years ago couch potatoes were a sorry sight rather than the norm and besides, games consoles and the PC hadn't been invented and what was the point of sitting around and looking at a blank TV screen all morning and afternoon?

And we have to face the reality that it is now up to parents to take on the role that schools took years ago, in providing times of physical activity because only 6% of schools are now reckoned to have a gym and many don't have 'house' or school sports days and the practice sessions that came before them. Add to that the fact that fewer children now walk to school.

The benefits of exercise in maintaining a healthy body include combating diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease. Without doubt, outdoor play enriches children's social skills as well as their physical well-being. It's good for them at all ages and it's good for the whole family.

Happily, it seems that a lot of children and parents are on to this.

According to research by the toy industry experts, NPD Eurotoys EpoS Retail Tracking, the traditional toy market is growing by 3% this year, so far.

The fastest growing category is 'Outdoor/Sports' toys, which have increased 11% in the first six months of the year (January – June 2004) and this represents no less than 22% of all money spent on toys.

The great summer weather of 2003 probably sparked renewed interest in pools – this year sales are 33% ahead of last year.

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And the best seller of June this year? Well, it was the old favourite, the Swingball.

Parents too benefit as well from a game of Swingball or badminton on the lawn, and the occasional bounce on the trampoline, as well as encouraging their children to begin enjoying gentle exercise that will benefit them later in life.

The family diet, in its broadest sense, should not concentrate on food alone, but on a family lifestyle that includes play and healthy outdoor activity.

With small children, say up to seven or eight, it's relatively easy to encourage them to use outdoor play equipment, such as slides, swings and climbing frames. In fact, with nursery age children the trouble starts when you try and leave the play area!

It doesn't take much more to encourage this century's TV orientated, computer doting youngster to be enjoying physical activity and benefiting from it at the same time.

With a few pieces of equipment – a basketball hoop, a small trampoline, a Swingball game and a Frisbee - you have the beginnings of a keep fit studio.

You can create an activity assault course in your garden, play garden skittles, and encourage water games in hot weather. If you don't mention the words physical and exercise in the same sentence, you'll be able to encourage your children to take part.

The only downside is that your garden may become the neighbourhood's most popular play area but you can enjoy the peace and quiet again once school restarts.

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