

By Barbara Holden

I don't know about you, but I'm welcoming Fall with open arms. Those cooler temperatures, cozy sweaters and of course, watching my grandson jump into a huge pile of freshly raked leaves.

While he's out there running around and having fun, I'll know that he's actually getting the physical activity he needs to develop hand eye coordination, strong bones and a healthy heart.

We've talked before about the importance of regular physical activity through play.

You'll remember that it's recommend that toddlers should be engaged in at least 30 minutes of structured physical activity and at least 60 minutes to several hours of unstructured play each day.

For preschoolers, bump that up to 60 minutes of structured physical activity and 60 minutes to several hours of unstructured play.

“Physically active children have higher levels of cardiorespiratory endurance and muscular strength, and well-documented health benefits include reduced body fatness, more favorable cardiovascular and metabolic disease risk profiles, enhanced bone health, and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression,” reports the US Department of Health and Human Services' Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee.

And there's no better time than Fall to get outside and enjoy the everyday Autumn adventures that also benefit your little one's physical health. Here are some fun Fall festivities from the online parenting site, PreSchoolersToday.com:

Little leaves helper: While you are toiling with raking the leaves, let your child "work" alongside with a plastic rake or scamper around the yard with a dump truck and collect leaves to be deposited onto a main pile. Of course, this is unusually followed by a big family jump into the pile.

Pumpkin patcher: Take a family trip to your favorite local pumpkin patch. Let your little one take her time running and jumping through the patch to select her favorite pumpkin. She might also want to decorate the pumpkin with markers, or help you scoop out the inside goop once you have carved it!

Zoo adventurer: The Zoo is generally less crowded during weekdays in the Fall, making it a perfect time for parents with strollers to make their way around the Zoo grounds and for little ones to spend more time in front of favorite exhibits without the worry of having to move on in order to let the next groups of visitors have their turn. Plus, the animals are usually livelier due to the cooler weather.

According to the non-profit Children and Nature Network, the more outdoor play the better the more likely you are to prevent child obesity. The group also sites emotional,

cognitive, creative and even scholastic benefits as evidence to support a child's need for nature.

“Children are smarter, more cooperative, happier and healthier when they have frequent and varied opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors,” says the group. “Green plants and play yards reduce children's stress. Free play in natural areas enhances children's cognitive flexibility, problem-solving ability, creativity, self-esteem, and self-discipline.

“Students score higher on standardized tests when natural environments are integral to schools' curricula,” the group continues. “Effects of attention-deficit disorder are found to be reduced when children have regular access to the out of doors.”

As parents and grandparents, it's our job to nurture that vital nature connection. Take a walk, ride your bike, chase lightening bugs or play hide and seek in the park. You'll be building memories and a healthier family, with lots of laughs along the way. Now, that's a great thing to Fall into.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.