Natural Play Spaces: A Place for Positive Youth Development

REBECCA MEYER,
EDUCATIONAL DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT
2 KEY QUESTIONS

- Why should we invest energy and resources into creating nature-based youth development opportunities?
- What are design principles that can help us make the most of these opportunities for youth?
BACKGROUND

- M.Ed., Environmental Education
- Non-formal Programs (Residential Environmental Learning Center, Girl Scouts, Nature Center, 4-H)
- Extension Educator, Educational Design & Development
NARRATIVE

- Girl Scouts, an urban greening experience
- Thesis focus, “The Effects of Green Space on Children’s Sense of Community”
- Nature and Neighborhoods Tour
- Youth, Sticks & Treehouses
- Nature-Engaged Families
WHERE WE BEGIN....

“The knowledge base shows that exposure to natural spaces – everything from parks to open countryside to gardens and other greenspace – is good for health.”

-Sustainable Development Commission (2008)
ALL OF THESE SENSES....

- Life trajectory (e.g., Chawla)
- Children’s sacred places and sense of place (e.g., Sobel, Wilson)
- Sense of Community (e.g., Larson, Meyer, Moore)
- The *Geography of Childhood* (Nabhan & Trimble)
LOTS OF BENEFITS, BUT...

WORRISOME TRENDS

- **Less time outdoors** (e.g., Clements, 2004; Karsten, 2005; Pergams & Zaradic, 2006)
- **Less access to playspaces** (e.g., Gaster, 1991; Wridt, 2004)
- **More supervision and structure** (e.g., Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Karsten & van Vliet, 2006; Kytta, 2004)
- **Gender differences** (Karsten, 2003; McMillan et al., 2006)
- **Increased time with multimedia** (e.g., Pergams & Zaradic, 2006; Roberts et al., 2005)
WHERE WE CAN MOVE FORWARD...

“American adults generally believe that childhood experiences in nature are important for all children, and very strongly support the claim that they personally intend to support children in having these experiences.”

-Fraser, Heimlich, & Yocco, 2010
ROOM FOR GROWTH

“Adults are willing to make the effort to encourage children to have nature experiences in spite of the perceived risk of injury to these children, but do not appear to model these behaviors through personal storytelling or mentoring behavior based on their own experiences.”

-Fraser, Heimlich, & Yocco, 2010
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FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE....

Enough Quality Time in Nature

Nature Rich

Nature Deficit
THE BIG IDEAS:

- Situate in ‘favorite’ places (Moore)
- Integrate more free play
- Plan developmentally appropriate play (Sobel)
- Use nature design principles (Sobel)
- BUT A little structure ain’t bad

“What’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds.”

WHERE WAS YOUR FAVORITE CHILDHOOD PLAY SPACE?
WHY WAS IT YOUR FAVORITE?

- What are some of the key characteristics of this memory, place?
- What did you do here?
- Were you alone or with others?
WHAT MIGHT IT RESEMBLE?

“...a ditch somewhere—or a creek, meadow, woodlot, or marsh...These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down....”

- Pyle, R.M. in Nabhan and Trimble
WHAT IS NATURE?
BUT MAYBE SURPRISING?

- Preferred environments  
  (e.g., Balling & Falk, Kaplan & Kaplan)
- Adolescent time-out  
  (e.g., Kaplan & Kaplan)
- “Urban Associated” gateway activities  
  (e.g., Outdoor Industry Foundation)
FAVORITE PLACES
SITE MAP
NATURE LEARNING SPACES

- Principles primarily around the design of physical space (Moore)
  - Pedestrian Networks
  - Playing Along the Way
  - Topography
  - Hide & Seekness
  - Harvesting Found Objects
FREE PLAY, NOT FREE TIME
FREE (UNSTRUCTURED) PLAY

- Youth-driven
- Open-ended
- Few explicit rules or supervision
- Free choice in activity
PLAY SPECTRUM

Unstructured  Desired  Typical  Structured
UNSTRUCTURED PLAY – A SNAPSHOT

- Play is essential to cognitive, social, physical, emotional youth development. (Ginsberg et al, 2007)
- Nature’s way of preparing youth for life. (Uploaders, 2009)
- Outdoor play spaces can be designed to encourage free play. (Moore & Wong, 1997; White & Stoecklin, 1998)
- Mothers may ascribe higher value to structured play than professionals. (Fisher et al, 2008)
- Effective nature play embodies certain characteristics and encompasses certain practices. (Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Center, 2006; Sobel, 2008)
DAVID SOBEL'S STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT:

Ages 4-7 → Empathy
Ages 8-11 → Exploration
Ages 12-15 → Social Action
SOBEL’S 7 NATURE DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

- Making forts and special places
- Playing hunting and gathering games
- Shaping small worlds
- Developing friendships with small animals
- Constructing adventures
- Descending into fantasies
- Following paths and figuring out shortcuts

Sobel, 2008
SO...DESIGNING

- Help parents and professionals define and understand the value of unstructured play.
- Help parents and professionals practice effective design and facilitation of unstructured play.
- Provide spaces and opportunities for free play.
- Design for free play.
- Seek to understand and remove barriers to unstructured play.
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EMPATHY
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EXPLORATION
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PARTING THOUGHTS

- Programming in natural spaces is good for people
- Increase programming for Nature-richness
- Follow the 4 principles
- We don’t know perfection yet
NATURAL SPACES & POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Steve Bowles…
“something that happens between the youth worker, the young people, and the sun, the moon and the campfire.”

~ Siurala

Evgeni Dinev
Thank you!

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