Designing Natural Play Spaces: Best Practices & Examples
Natural Play Spaces: Best Practices & Examples
How do children experience nature?

For adults, the environment is often a backdrop for their activities... For children, the environment isn’t in the background, but is a catalyst for or key ingredient of their activities: **something to interact with directly.** (White & Soecklin)

*The world of nature is not a scene or even a landscape. Nature for the child is sheer sensory experience. Children judge the natural setting not by its aesthetics, but rather by how they can interact with the environment.*

(White & Stoecklin, 1998, referencing Elizabeth Prescott)
Natural spaces are **timeless & wild**.

They are **not created by adults**.

They are **diverse**—in terms of things to explore, their materials, their change through the seasons.

(White & Soecklin, 1998)

What appeals to children about natural spaces as places to play?
What qualities define a natural play space?
• there is space for free play of all kinds
• children can manipulate the environment, leave a trace
• there are loose parts that can become tools for play
• it reflects the surrounding environment
• it may have other functions, in addition to providing a place to play
• it is designed, created and maintained with the help of its stakeholders
• it’s designed to grow and change

(adapted from White & Soecklin, 1998 and Danks, 2010)
Children’s free play is a complex concept that eludes precise definition, but children’s play typically is pleasurable, self-motivated, imaginative, non-goal directed, spontaneous, active, and free of adult-imposed rules. Quality play involves the whole child: gross motor, fine motor, senses, emotion, intellect, individual growth and social interaction.

(White & Stoecklin, 1998, referencing Fergus P. Hughes, Joe L. Frost, & and Paul J. Jacobs, and Malka Haas)

Space for free play of all kinds

4 active/gross-motor  movement-based

5 restful/stationary  creative/dramatic/narrative/building

6 artistic  group/social  fine-motor  individual
Children need tools, open space, challenge and opportunities to control and manipulate the environment. Suransky calls this “history making power” - the power for the child to imprint themselves upon the landscape, endow the landscape with significance and experience their own actions as transforming the environment. (White & Stoecklin, 1998, referencing Malka Haas and V. R. Suransky)
They reflect the surrounding environment
They may have other functions, along with providing a place to play.
These spaces engage many stakeholders to be successful
This engagement can happen in an ongoing way, and stakeholders can include parents, educators from schools and out-of-school programs, day-care providers, gardeners and plant lovers, public health advocates, local artists and craftspeople and of course... kids!
They’re never done...
In the words of eco-schoolyard designer Sharon Danks, “Never finish.” Successful natural play spaces have a plan for both maintenance—stewardship—and growth, which includes taking care of the space and regularly adding or changing elements. This stewardship keeps people invested in the space and supports additional learning that can happen in natural play spaces.
Elements found in a natural play space

• water
• vegetation, including trees, bushes, flowers and long grasses
• animals, creatures in ponds, and other living things
• sand, best if it can be mixed with water
• natural color, diversity and change throughout the seasons
• places and features to sit in, on, under, lean against, and provide shelter and shade
• gathering spaces for small and large groups
• different levels and nooks and crannies, places that offer privacy and views
• structures, equipment and materials that can be (or have been) changed, actually or in children’s imaginations, including plentiful loose parts
• place-making features (including art)

(adapted from White & Soecklin, 1998 and Danks, 2010)
Water and Sand

Water, especially water that moves or can be moved, can be used to float objects, splash in, hop over... Water, coupled with sand and a sloping hill, can be used to make rivers and dams. Play space features can also be designed to mimic a local creek, river, or landforms, to let kids play with how water moves over their local region.
Vegetation, Diversity, Color and Seasonal Change

Think about how the space will change over the course of the year, and over several years. Plants offer a variety of texture and color, and can create cozy or mysterious places to explore. They can also provide raw materials for building and loose-parts play.
Large and Small Spaces, Shelter and Shade

The play space should offer places for small groups to gather and still feel safe. A place for a large group can become a site for celebrations, performances, workshops, etc. Shade from structures, trees and other vegetation makes the space comfortable on a sunny day. Think, too, about how the space offers a nice place for adults to relax and gather, as well.
Playing with Materials, Place-Making with Art

The materials used (plants as well as non-plant) can make use of what’s on hand in the local area, create exciting and inviting play structures, and reflect local industry or culture, making the play space feel one-of-a-kind.
Natural play areas look very different than typical playgrounds!

They might look more like woods, a prairie, a creek... and less like a manicured garden or a “capital-D” designed park.

They might have pieces of traditional playground equipment, but many other elements as well.
Case Studies

• Boxerwood Gardens Nature Center (Lexington, VA)
• Pier 6 Playground at Brooklyn Bridge Park (New York)
• Kolle 37 Adventure Playground (Berlin, Germany)
• Biotope at Tokiwano Elementary School (Kyoto, Japan)
Nature-based Play

- Emphasis on natural materials (no traditional playground equipment)
- Lots of loose parts
- There are a variety of spaces, and each supports multiple directions for play

Boxerwood Gardens Nature Center (Lexington, VA)
Imagination and Exploration

The Discovery Area’s goal is to foster a love for the outdoors. Promoting active, healthy, and imaginative play while children interact with nature. No sidewalk, sign, or store-bought toy will tell you what to do—let exploration guide your children’s path.

Discovery Area Rules:
- Parents are responsible for their children at all times.
- Do not throw rocks or feed animals.
- Pets and bicycles are not allowed.

Joe Bailey Memorial Children’s Discovery Area
• Mix of industrially-made play structures with native plants, rock, water, sand
• Swings combine with sloping topography
• Seating for adults could provide performance/large group gathering seating as well
• Water is used in a few ways: both as a material to play with, and in rain gardens that create a lush marsh garden

Pier 6 Playground at Brooklyn Bridge Park (New York, NY)
Pier 6 Playground at Brooklyn Bridge Park (New York, NY)
The park lets children take risks... in safe ways.

In addition to areas for play with water, sand and plants, children can build the environment themselves with some (but very limited) help from staff.

The park engages older children and teens as well as younger ones (it’s for ages 6-16).

Children can play on their own, as well as take part in workshops (cooking, woodcarving, metalwork, mosaic, etc.).

Kolle 37 Adventure Playground (Berlin, Germany)
• The garden is part restoration project, incorporating plants that were on the land before urbanization

• Emphasis on creating habitat, and then observing that habitat

• Culinary garden – grow and harvest food, including rice

• Children are key stewards of the garden – feel ownership over it and are involved in building and maintaining it

Biotope at Tokiwano Elementary School (Kyoto, Japan)
Biotope at Tokiwano Elementary School (Kyoto, Japan)
Things to keep thinking about:

What **local qualities and resources** can the play space highlight? Materials, stories, traditions, industry, crafts, etc...

Who are (or could be) **stakeholders** in this project? How can they be involved?

Remember the advice of Sharon Danks: “Dream big, start small” and “Never finish.” How can the project **grow**?

How can the park be an **inviting place for parents**, grandparents, adults and teens?

Remember all of the **senses**... and all of the **seasons**...
References


Additional web resources

Frode Svane (Norwegian Play Space Designer, Landscape Architect): http://home.c2i.net/swan/skolensutemiljo.htm

Playground Designs blog: http://playgrounddesigns.blogspot.com

Green Playgrounds on Edutopia: http://www.edutopia.org/sustainable-schoolyard-design

Children Discovering Nature in Northwest Minnesota

Nature-based Play

29. Tracks for water play (Scandinavia). Frode Svane. [http://home.c2i.net/swan/skolensutemiljo.htm](http://home.c2i.net/swan/skolensutemiljo.htm)
33. Willow tunnel in winter (England). Leonora Enking. [http://www.flickr.com/photos/33037982@N04/5227340054/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/33037982@N04/5227340054/)
Images, continued

35 Treehouse lookout (Nebraska City, NE). Shelly Staebler.
40 Tree climbing structure by Asbjorn Flemming (Norway) rom Sharon Danks; From Asphalt to Ecosystems; pg 164.
41 Pattern in logs (Nebraska City, NE). Shelly Staebler.
42 Path at Castle Park (Crookston, MN). Kristine Neu.
47b Joe Bailey Memorial Children’s Discovery Area poster.