

Natural Playspaces



What is a Natural Playspace?

Natural playspaces offer a blend of natural areas, environmental features and plants to interest children in learning about the wonders and secrets of the natural world. Swings and slides may still be included, however natural playspaces offer unstructured spaces and activities for learning and spontaneous play.

Natural playspaces:

- Allow children to be spontaneous, active and creative.
- Provide for children of all ages and abilities, and for boys and girls alike.
- Promote light, moderate or vigorous physical activity that supports children's growth and development.



A Good Blend

Play is a vital part of childhood and growing up. Children learn through play to develop social, physical and emotional skills. Providing children with an outdoor learning environment that incorporates areas for quiet, natural, creative, active and stimulating play will allow children to learn whilst using their imagination. By inviting a child to use their initiative and explore possibilities we provide them with the best opportunities to learn.

Designed playspaces can offer lots of interesting and enjoyable places for children and carers to spend time. Natural playspaces accommodate activities including:

- connecting with nature and elements of nature
- playing with water and sand
- playing with loose equipment/parts/found items
- climbing
- rolling down hills
- growing plants for smelling and tasting
- observing insects, animals and birds
- nurturing and observing worm farms and compost areas
- digging patches
- exploring
- gravel pits for older children
- talking in quiet social areas
- moving around on interesting pathways
- riding a bike over bumps
- growing and exploring arbours and tee pees



Natural Appeal

When children really enjoy a well designed play space, they want to return there again and again. The playspace has unique meaning for them and offers special memories to share.



Creek Beds

Natural slopes make great places for creek beds. These areas can be planted out with strappy plant species to simulate a natural dry creek bed environment. If you include a tap at the high end, the creek bed can become a watercourse. Ensure adequate drainage is provided to prevent pooling of water. Select pebbles and stones appropriate for the children's age eg. avoid small pebbles if children are under 3 years of age.



Digging Patches

Digging patches give children another medium to explore and encourage imaginative and constructive, physical play. These can be designed into a corner and integrated with plantings and/or vegetable patches. Ensure that the site is free of contamination prior to constructing the digging patch. It is recommended that an adequate cover is provided for digging patches. The most suitable type of soil for digging patches is a 50:50 sand soil blend.

Rocks and Boulders

Creative placement of rocks and boulders throughout a playspace can provide users with easy to challenging "routes". Rocks and boulders can be great for surrounding sandpits and digging patches, learning climbing skills or just good old fashioned fun. Children almost always gravitate toward rocks and boulders, they become the immediate favourite place for children of all ages to explore and hang out.

Incorporated into a mound or embankment, climbing rocks and boulders are excellent for building upper and lower body strength and are an asset in any natural playspace.

Unstructured Play Areas

These include unencumbered grassed areas for running and informal ball games as well as sloped areas for rolling. These open spaces encourage spontaneous play and games such as tag or ball games and often appeal to older age groups.

Imaginative, Creative, Exploratory Play Areas

These areas are often the most neglected part of children's playspaces. They can be inexpensive to create, requiring some imagination and enthusiasm on your part. Plantings can provide scents, textures, forms, colours and play props whilst encouraging birds and wildlife to the playspace. Think about incorporating sounds using wind chimes, wind socks or musical instruments. Natural play environments provide not only settings for quality play but also offer diversity and educational opportunities for a child's developmental needs.

Quiet Areas

Quiet areas allow the child to interact with the environment, which encourages calmness and supports emotional development. We all need a bit of "time out" occasionally.

Planting

Trees, shrubs and groundcovers play a number of roles in a playspace. Trees and shrubs can be used as wind breaks, to provide shade and moderate the temperature, reduce glare, define play zones and can be used as an educational tool. Deciduous trees can block out summer sun but allow the warmth of winter sun. Plants can also be used to create private, hidden spaces with a "sense of place".

Natural Shade

Shade is imperative for all playspaces. If an area feels uncomfortably hot or glary it will not be utilised. Trees provide the best shade quality, filtering sunlight and lowering summer temperature by an average of 8-10°C. If possible, playspaces should be positioned in areas with seasonal shade from trees or hedges.

Inspection and Maintenance

A natural habitat will attract wildlife. Ensure that an inspection of the playspace is conducted before children enter. Regular maintenance to remove debris and weeds is essential.



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