

Designing and Creating Natural Play Environments for Young Children

by Rusty Keeler



like? Did this place change along with the seasons? What sort of games did you play and what did you discover there?

Most of us have vivid memories of our favorite childhood play environment. This was the place where we began to discover the wonder of playful exploration. It was the place where we first interacted with the natural world. This place was our introduction to the environment, our community, and the cycles of life.

The places that adults remember playing in as children are so often natural places — places with a stream, clumps of spongy moss, thick layers of slippery mud, fallen logs, or even a mound of dirt piled high in a vacant lot in the city. There is just something about connecting with the natural world that is so important for all people — particularly children. These are the kinds of experiences that nourish our souls.

Unfortunately, these days many children don't have the kinds of opportunities that we had not so long ago. Our fast-paced culture now places greater emphasis on going, doing, and becoming, and less on wandering, searching, and discovering. With modern urban and suburban development, natural, or



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There is a new movement in the world of outdoor play environments — a shift back to nature. Instead of filling backyards and playgrounds with traditional metal and plastic equipment, early childhood centers across the country are transforming their outdoor landscapes into magical environmental *playscapes*. You too can create sensory-rich play spaces that stimulate healthy development, change throughout the seasons, and offer children a world of creative play and exploration. These new play environments, inspired by the local community and its natural resources, can be made from grassy hills, trees, herbs, paths, sculpture, sand and water, and more — all with an intriguing medley of colors, sounds, scents, and textures.

CHERISHED MEMORIES

Think about your childhood for a moment. What was your favorite outdoor place to play? What was that environment like? Do your memories evoke specific sights, scents, and sounds? What did you do there? What did it look like and feel

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

wild areas are less available. And now that both mothers and fathers often work outside of the home, a large number of young children are spending the majority of their days in structured child care and education settings. This means that the outdoor space at these centers becomes their outdoor world — the place they visit day after day. It is the place where many young children will first develop a relationship with the natural world. What will the children in your center discover out in the yard? What will they learn? And what will they experience?

Since children spend so much of their time in these settings, it is important to make these play environments as beautiful, educational, and engaging as possible. We need to realize that when we design a play environment, we are really creating children's experiences, which, if we do a good job, will become cherished memories. How do we create safe, meaningful environments that support and celebrate the cognitive, physical, and emotional development of young children?

CHANGE OF HEART

After working for five years as the conceptual designer for a playground equipment company, I had the opportunity to work in The Netherlands for a Dutch playground manufacturer. I learned a great deal about children's play and development while designing play equipment for both companies, but it wasn't until I spent a year in Europe that I truly began to understand the value in children's playful connections with nature. In Europe, I saw public spaces and interactive public art like nothing I had seen in the United States. There were magical sculpture gardens and one-of-a-kind play environments. Neighborhoods and parks had playgrounds that blended seamlessly with the natural world. Every child should have access to these types of dynamic playscapes. And every child can.

ONE OF A KIND SPACES

A well-designed outdoor play environment should be a reflection and statement of the local community and its environment. And it should, of course, suit the individual needs and characteristics of each program. A play environment in Arizona, for example, should be different from one in Alaska, particularly because the materials and plants available in those regions are so different. Think of play environments as a microcosm of the greater environment surrounding the community.

Be creative. To create a truly rich, imaginative play environment, add local stone, native plants, and other natural

treasures. And make use of your most valuable resource — the talent and skills of local artists and crafts people — by turning your playscape into a community-built project. Community-built projects are organized, designed, and constructed by community members. By making your project a community-built one, you'll cut down on expenses, establish new friendships and partnerships for your program, and infuse a sense of real belonging into the community.

CREATING YOUR PLAYSCAPE


To start, form a playscape committee. Ask staff members, parents, and community members to join. Then create an inventory of the talents and skills in your community. Can you find some masons who would be interested in being a part of your project? Carpenters? Artists? Gardeners? Next, create a list of materials and plantings that are available in your community. Are there places to gather boulders or old logs? Local plant nurseries or parents with knowledge of plants can help you make a list of safe trees and shrubs that grow well in your area. These two lists of resources will become your *design palette*.

Your center's playscape design will gradually evolve once you see the skills of the people that want to help build and what types of materials you may have access to. Once you have your basic design, the playscape committee should work on obtaining the necessary materials, tools, and volunteers needed for the construction. Oh, and don't forget the snacks!

When I design playscapes, I typically schedule four to six months for planning. Once the planning is completed, building the playscape typically requires four to five days with 25 to 100 volunteers each day. You are sure to enjoy the special moments your community members will share as they work together. Your project will leave everyone with a sense of pride and ownership that will last long after it has been completed.

Every community has surprise resources and talents. Sometimes all it takes is a bit of detective work to find them. In Caroline, New York, we contacted the city forester to see if he would like to contribute materials. He happily donated huge





maple tree sections to our project. The trees had been recently cut down in the city, and this was a chance to give them a second life. A local sculptor used a chain saw to carve the sections, then sanded and polished them and transformed them into a beautiful, huggable sculpture. We covered the ground surrounding the sculpture with soft wood chips to make the sculpture safe for the children to climb. Add to that a simple maintenance plan, and the center had a wonderful, interactive work of art that the children will enjoy for years.

In Bellingham, Washington, volunteers collected smooth river boulders and local driftwood to create a playscape for young children with special needs. The large boulders were bonded together with cement to create a textural sand and water play sculpture. Colored marbles were embedded between the rocks to add a sense of discovery and surprise. Driftwood pieces were added to the yard as decoration, with larger pieces used as balancing, climbing, and sitting areas. Native plants were also used throughout the playscape, giving the children the opportunity to play hide-and-seek in the tall decorative grasses, sit in the shade of trees, and enjoy the delicious aroma of herbs. With all these local elements, the children who use this space get a first hand feel of their local natural environment.

In Skaneateles, New York, several of the members of an infant-toddler playscape committee were master gardeners, so that environment became very rich in plants. We created a Sunflower jungle, forests of Jerusalem artichokes and black-eyed Susans, a mini orchard of Dwarf Apple Trees, and we planted a variety of other trees, herbs, and shrubs. The owner of a pre-cast concrete company donated a section of culvert to be used as a tunnel, and the owner of a paving company donated the paving for a series of winding tricycle paths. We added a rubber surface to the paths to help protect toddlers from skinned knees and to give infants a soft crawling pad as they learn to walk. As a final touch, a local metal fabricator made a variety of chimes, so the children could experiment with sound.

SOUNDSCAPES

Shhh. Listen. What do you hear right now? While we are typically a visually-dominated culture, the sounds in our environment have a tremendous effect on us, often subconsciously. The landscape of sound in an environment is often referred to as the *soundscape*. When we think of creating multi-sensory play environments, sound is an important element that should not be overlooked.

At Cornell University's Early Learning Center in Ithaca, New York, we created an entire soundscape for their existing play

environment. Our goal was to incorporate sound in a way that complemented the existing play area. We did so by first spending time getting to know the space and becoming familiar with which activities and types of play occurred in the different areas of the play environment. Then we considered the following three uses of sound:

- 1) Sound as a backdrop to play. Ambient sounds create an overall mood that becomes a subtle part of the environment. Things such as wind chimes in trees make great melodies when the wind blows. Choose a variety for different sounds and textures — different sizes, different materials, even wood or bamboo. Many plants make sounds in the wind as well. Try planting large ornamental grasses or bamboo, as well as trees that rustle in the wind like Quaking Aspen.
- 2) Sound as a by-product of play. This is achieved by adding sound elements such as bells, chimes, and rattles to places where children commonly play. Think about what kinds of play occur in the different areas and how you can match the textures of sound to the types of play. Try to imagine what a gross-motor play area sounds like. What about a quiet, get-away spot? Now incorporate items into those play areas that will create the types of sounds you envisioned in those areas. For example, a quiet nook could have delicate chimes that ring when children pass into the space. A gross motor climbing tree or play equipment could have cowbells hung that jostle as the children climb.
- 3) Sound as the goal of play. Instead of incorporating sound as an inconspicuous part of the environment as described above, sound can also be used as an item that children can directly explore and play with. Install interesting instruments and sound sculptures for the children to experiment with. For example, you might include a metal drum for the children to bang, a set of bells for the children to ring, a giant marimba or xylophone to play a song on, a gong to hit, or a bell to clang.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

Buckminster Fuller once said, "Playgrounds should be renamed research environments, because that is what the children are doing so vigorously. They are not just playing. They are finding out how the universe works." We know that through play, children learn vital problem-solving skills, they gain a sense of accomplishment, and they are introduced to the joy of exploration. By providing young children with sensory rich playscapes filled with colors, delightful sounds, surprises, textures, and enticing scents, you will be opening the doors to a world of discovery. This is what memories — and knowledge — are made of!