

Your Outdoor Spaces

In our May 23, 2007 *ExchangeEveryDay* e-newsbrief, we asked readers to submit great design ideas from their early childhood programs: • pathway, garden, sound, or texture features • elements that invite exploration, physical challenge • special places for social interaction • solutions to a challenging problem • ideas for inclusion . . . to name a few.

To participate in our gallery of great design ideas, readers sent photographs and brief descriptions of creative elements incorporated into their outdoor environments. A sampling of ideas are shown on the following pages. To read past *ExchangeEveryDay* newsbriefs or to subscribe, go to www.ChildCareExchange.com/eed.



Old Tree Friend

Our aging Russian Olive tree was starting to sag. The children and teachers did not want to cut it down; it's like an old friend. We built this beautiful treehouse that the children can spend some quiet time in or play on in a natural setting with a friend. It supports the tree, keeping it safe for exploration.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Children's Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States



Hay Bale

My favorite and least expensive pieces of equipment are just hay bales. We stick a plastic steer head into the bale and the kids take small lassos and try to rope a steer. They love it!

Breezy Point Day School
Langhorne, Pennsylvania,
United States

Climbing Wall

Our climbing wall allows children to problem solve, challenge themselves by climbing, jumping, flying, and having fun with their friends.

Early Childhood
Program at
The American School
Foundation of
Guadalajara
Guadalajara, México



Nature Cabin

Our play yard features a log cabin we've named "Nature Cabin" where children can play with all items of nature through realistic investigation or symbolic pretend play. The cabin pays respect to our state's pioneer and homesteading history and provides a cozy space for children to play, while still being easily supervised by staff. The tree-stump table and chairs are inexpensive as well as versatile. They allow children to "play house," but also serve as a convenient place for hands-on play with minerals, fossils, leaves, seeds, seashells, feathers, and other natural materials. Bird and plant identification books, and resouces such as bug cages and plastic magnifying glasses are also kept in the "Nature Cabin."

Illinois State University Child Care Center
Normal, Illinois, United States

Children's Garden

This children's garden in front of our center used to be an unfenced, grassy lawn just a few years ago. It is now a nature area enjoyed by our two- to five-year-old children — an alternative to their traditional playground.

Parent volunteers fenced the area for us. Parents, children, and a few volunteers from a neighborhood environmental group were involved in planting the garden with plants native to our area. We wanted to create an environmentally-friendly garden and provide opportunities for children to observe birds, bugs, and butterflies that are drawn to the plantings.

Kensington-Forest Glen Children's Center
Montgomery Child Care Association
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States





Arbor

The arbor and benches, covered with grape vines, creates a special space for children to be alone or spend time with a special friend.

This arbor was designed and built by Playworks4Kids, Inc. for Neighborhood House of Milwaukee, Inc. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States



Sensory Garden

You can see one of our five sensory garden boxes in this photo. There is one for each sense, they are small, manageable for children to see and water, and they are along the bike path in our outdoor environmental learning center so that everyone can enjoy them.

Creative School for Children
Educational Research Center
for Child Development
University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida, United States

Driftwood Beams

The outdoor environment at our preschool becomes our children's outdoor world — the place they visit day after day. We use natural elements from our local beach and forest to create a space where their curiosity is met with sensory experiences. We gather driftwood to use as balancing, climbing, and sitting areas. Rocks and boulders from a local river bank are stepping stones or hideaways for insects and worms. We collect leaves and seeds from the local forest and scatter these in our garden.

Tawa Montessori Preschool
Wellington, New Zealand



Waterfall

Head Start Family Child Care provider Carol Wroth awoke one morning last winter to a backyard that was impressively damaged by fallen evergreen trees from a major storm. Her thoughts turned to her dream of creating an outdoor space that would give children in her program experiences in the natural world within the boundaries of her backyard. They created a tricycle path that meanders around a sand pit and an herb-scented berm. They built a waterfall and shallow pond that will be a cozy space for reading and quiet times while children listen to the sound of water moving over river rocks.

Puget Sound ESD Head Start
Renton, Washington, United States



Theater

I recycle waste materials to create children's activity centers. Here, I took old wooden crates and made bench seats that can be arranged in a semi-circle to face a stage. The seats can also be turned over and used as boats. The children and I made a stage from an old, wide-screen television frame placed on a plywood case; this arrangement can be used for puppetry or plays.

Adam Buckingham, early childhood teacher
Auckland, New Zealand



Outdoor Classroom

Pictured is a small portion of the Rustic Outdoor Classroom and Certified Wildlife Habitat that was originally an unusable area due to run-off and poor drainage. This low area adjacent to the woods was transformed by design consultants into a fenced multi-purpose, all-weather outdoor facility with a boardwalk, naturally sustaining pond, observation deck with overhead trellis, storage shed, flush stage, rustic oak benches, and areas designated for native plantings.

The Tatnall Preschool Play and Learning Environment
Wilmington, Delaware, United States

Outdoor Classroom by Custom Playgrounds,
Brooklandville, Maryland, United States



Hole

Here are a few photos of our hole. My wife and I let the children in our family child care

program start digging it a little over a year ago. It has been a great way to build large and fine muscle skills as well as promote cooperative play, scientific thinking, and imagination. One day they found a bone — half the kids thought it was from a dinosaur and the other half were sure it was from a pirate. Children of all ages love digging, hauling, and learning in the hole.

Explorations Early Learning
Sioux City, Iowa,
United States



Garden Arch

We create a “garden arch” each year. The arch is made of PVC® pipe and chicken wire. The children plant seeds in the early spring and by late summer they have a shady, green place to play. We have grown tomatoes, cucumbers, peas, and beans on our arch as well as flowering vines. The children enjoy watching the plants grow to cover the arch. They like to pick the vegetables to eat. We leave the frame up year round and it is big enough that children can ride a small tricycle through the arch.

My Friends’ House Childcare
Walla Walla, Washington, United States



Drama and Climbing Space

We have a bridge for children to sit and socialize within a peaceful atmosphere. The children love to sit and talk in pairs or small groups. The children spend lots of time climbing and creating stories to act out in this area. It provides the children with gross motor challenges in a natural environment.

Child and Family Development Center
New Hampshire Technical Institute
Concord, New Hampshire, United States



Raceway

Our outdoor play environment integrates elements of texture and spatial negotiation, including a suspension bridge and a race track. The children’s physical, creative, and cognitive development is enhanced with pathways, gardens, and a flowing fountain in a park-like setting for play.

Nancy’s Noah’s Ark
Mill Creek, Washington, United States

Rock Garden

The children have enjoyed the endless discovery opportunities our rock garden has provided. It has been a mountain, river, home for dinosaurs, car raceway, and an occasional picnic spot. They have painted the rocks with water and watercolors; they have hunted for gold and seashells. The opportunity for practicing their balance is a natural attraction. This part of our yard is never empty and changes daily!

Westminster Presbyterian Church Preschool
Westlake Village, California, United States



Water Area

We are delighted with so many aspects of our new playground, particularly with our water area.

The sprinklers delight children with spray as the run-off becomes a zero-depth, safe, splash area/creek bed.



McNeil Child Development Center
Bright Horizons Family Solutions
Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania,
United States



Loose Parts

We specialize in “loose parts” in the outdoors. Children manipulate the chairs, blocks, tables, spoils, baskets, and other loose parts to represent their play, whether it includes house play, transportation, store play, or any other themes from their emerging interests. Children’s creativity and cooperation are enhanced when they have the ability and permission to construct their own environments for play.

Children’s Alley Preschool
Santa Cruz, California, United States

Willow Hut

This picture shows the willow hut on our one-year-old playground. The children enjoy having an enclosed space that allows



them to get away from all the other more active areas of the playground. Adults can also fit into the space, making it a perfect spot for reading a favorite book.



On the preschool playground, we use willow tunnels in a different way. Adding the tunnel over the bike path creates multiple opportunities for teachable moments. Children comment on the shade and shadows created by the willow branches. It also becomes the path’s gas station, car wash, and identification check point.

Ramstein Child Daycare Center
Ramstein Air Base, Germany



Rain Gutter Water Play

You can fashion this piece of equipment yourself. Rain gutters are nestled on wood supports and angled so that water flows from one to the next. Kid power keeps the water flowing by pouring water from the end bucket back into the top gutter! We have since added an old-fashioned hand pump at the top; this pumps water from a bucket that children have to keep filled from the end bucket! Imagine the fun of using a hand pump!

Rainbow Hill
Shickshinny, Pennsylvania, United States