

## A case for natural playscapes

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Recent studies have concluded that spending time in nature is an important component of human health and development. For many, nature inspires curiosity, creativity and a sense of freedom. And playing in natural landscapes provides opportunities for motor development and sensory experiences not available in the classroom or even on traditional playgrounds. While traditional playgrounds can confine children to specific activities and limit creative play, a movement towards more natural playscapes could have a profound impact on the development of important social, physical, and cognitive skills.

A study of playgrounds in Telemark, Norway, provides strong support for the developmental advantages of natural play. When compared with children that played on traditional playgrounds, children who played in a natural environment performed better on standardized motor skill tests, especially in the areas of balance and coordination.<sup>1</sup> Researchers contribute the more rapid motor development exploration of more rugged, unstructured landscapes of the natural environment during play. Conversely, natural play supporter Helle Nebelong believes playing on traditional structures “becomes simplified, and then the child doesn’t have to pay attention to his or her movements.”<sup>2</sup>

Natural environments also promote creativity. In the playscapes utilized in the studies in Telemark, children discovered areas for play, developed their own games for specific areas, and named spaces based on the style of play. “The Cone War,” “The Space Ship,” and “The Cliff” were among the favorite locations children named. Researchers concluded that the natural environment fostered more creative play by providing unstructured playscapes, loose materials and natural objects to play with<sup>3</sup>.

The developmental benefits of natural playspaces are especially important for young children. In a 1997 article in *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Mary Rivkin notes that “the younger the child the more the child learns through sensory and physical activity” so providing a more varied and natural setting that provide a sensory experience can strongly impact physical and cognitive development.<sup>4</sup>

Journalist and author Richard Louv has spent time interviewing children, parents, educators and researchers to examine childhood, and especially childhood connections with nature. He describes this relationship in his book *Childhood’s Future*:

Nature, for children, seems to work on at least two levels. For some children it serves as a blank slate on which they may draw the fantasies supplied by our culture...At a deeper level, nature gives children itself, for its own sake, not as a reflection of our culture. In addition to the sense of freedom and fantasy, access to nature also gives children a sense of privacy, of being separate from the adult world in a place older than the adult world<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Fjortoft, Ingunn. (2001) “The natural environment as a playground for children: the impact of outdoor play activities in pre-primary school children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. Vol 29, No 2.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, Linda (2006). “The politics of Play”. *Metropolis Observed*. November 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Fjortoft, Ingunn. (2001) “The natural environment as a playground for children: the impact of outdoor play activities in pre-primary school children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. Vol 29, No 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rivkin, M., (1997) The Schoolyard Habitat, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Louv, Richard. (1990) *Childhood’s Future*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Unfortunately, children are increasingly spending less time in natural settings. Revkin argues that society has begun to separate children from the natural environment that supports such positive aspects of development. Through urbanization, car-centered development, social deterioration, and pollution of water bodies, it has become increasingly difficult for youth to experience unguided encounters with nature.<sup>6</sup> Lou has referred to this disconnect as “nature deficit disorder”. Citing the hypothesis of “biophilia” he believes that humans have an innate need to “to see natural shapes in the horizon”<sup>7</sup> and are positively impacted by the natural environment. He questions whether removing that element has contributed to the increase in ADD and other mental health concerns among American youth.

Natural playgrounds help address these concerns, while promoting physical and cognitive development, by mimicking experiences in the natural environment and providing opportunities to explore more natural surroundings. They also provide a unique experience for the community to participate in activities associated with the park and the environment.

Several studies in the 1970’s and 80’s examining different types of playscapes supported both aspects. When compared to traditional playgrounds, playscapes that offered adventure, encouraged fantasy play, and provided a place of retreat were strongly favored. Furthermore, a majority of youth observed in three studies preferred inexpensive equipment and structures built by parents over other types of equipment<sup>8</sup>.

The Toddlerville Nature Walk is one example that has combined elements of nature and community. This playground at the Kansas City Kansas Community College childcare center provides modern features of playscapes with natural elements. Installed by Frye & Associates, the play structures separate age groups, providing opportunities for older students to build upper body strength through rock climbing and other activities while offering safe structures with sand tables, blocks, music, and other interactive features for pre-school age children. KCKCC uses the park for nature-themed, structured activities for parents and children<sup>9</sup>.

Natural playspaces have slowly been replaced by urban sprawl and the development of traditional playgrounds. Although the new playground has its merits and offers opportunities for guided play in a safe environment, there is an evident need to incorporate more natural elements into playspaces. As communities grow and develop, it is important to consider what is being lost in the process and make efforts to preserve more natural spaces for youth to explore, investigate, and be creative with their play.

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<sup>6</sup> Rivkin, M., (1997). The Schoolyard Habitat, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (61-66).

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, David (2006) “Louv Story”. Grist Environmental News & Commentary. <[www.grist.com](http://www.grist.com)>.

<sup>8</sup> Hart, Graig H. (ed.) (1993) *Children on playgrounds: research perspectives and applications*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>9</sup> Holleman, Doris. Kansas City Kansas Community College Campus Childcare Center. Personal communication. July 16, 2007.