

# Nature Playgrounds

Healthy  
*in nature*



## How to Use this Information

This information will introduce you to *nature playgrounds*, their benefits and, in particular, design and safety considerations when building them.

### ► Promote the concept!

Use this information to help promote and build awareness of nature playgrounds in your area.

### ► Spread the news!

- Give this information to parents, members of the public, fellow staff members, municipal leaders, community partners and others.
- Incorporate this information into proposals, communication materials or correspondence with municipal council and community partners.



## What is a Nature Playground?



Nature playgrounds have many names: natural playground, discovery play gardens, outdoor play space, naturescape or playscape. They refer to outdoor areas that are designed to provide a safe environment for play in a natural setting or with nature-based features. In a nature playground, it may not immediately be obvious how the playground elements should be used because it is up to children and adults to use their imagination as to how to best engage with what they find. The intention of nature playgrounds is to connect people to nature, expose the wonders and beauty of nature, and provide open-ended and creative play options. Nature playgrounds are ideal places for adults and children to spend time together in natural surroundings.<sup>1,2</sup>



## Benefits of Nature Playgrounds

Playing in nature playgrounds provides children with numerous physical, mental and social benefits. Physical benefits include increased motor skill development such as running, jumping, balancing and strength. Participation in nature playgrounds encourages emotional development and allows children to think critically, solve problems and make decisions. During their play in this setting, children learn to take and manage risks and overcome fears.<sup>3</sup>

### Playing in nature playgrounds:

- leads to increased concentration and attention.<sup>3</sup>
- nurtures collaborative skills and stimulates social interaction and cooperative play.<sup>3</sup>
- allows for free explorative play due to the varied and changeable environment.<sup>4</sup>
- provides opportunities for creative play, quiet space, music, art and nature.<sup>5</sup>

- ▶ enables children to challenge themselves physically and emotionally because there are graduated challenges or risks. For example, with boulders of different sizes and shapes, kids can climb or jump from a size that is appropriate to their ability.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ is accessible and challenging for all children, all ages, all sizes, all abilities, fitness levels, intelligence, cultures and genders.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ allows the use of one's imagination and to be creative without limitations.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ is inclusive, not exclusive, of ideas and people.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ is suggestive, not prescriptive, in the activities one can do. For example, traditional playground swings are for swinging. In nature playgrounds, the sky is the limit! <sup>6</sup>
- ▶ allows people to connect with each other and to nature through play.<sup>6</sup>



## Examples of Nature Playground Features <sup>1, 2</sup>

- ▶ Boulders to climb and sit on
- ▶ Trees for shade and shelter
- ▶ Flowers to smell and look at
- ▶ Grassy hills to roll down
- ▶ Streams and creeks to dam
- ▶ Ponds to catch insects and frogs
- ▶ Water features to pour, float objects in, splash and create mud
- ▶ Logs to practice balancing or climbing
- ▶ Tree stumps to climb on or jump off
- ▶ A multi-sensory garden to explore with flowers and edible fruits and vegetables
- ▶ Chimes, bongos, xylophones, sculptures, murals and other musical and art features to play and listen to
- ▶ Shrubs, vines, grasses



## Designing a Nature Playground

When designing a nature playground, you may want to consider the following:

- ▶ Ask for input from parents and children and then incorporate their ideas into the playground design.<sup>2,4</sup>
- ▶ Include the following five elements: rolling topography, boulders, logs, pathways and large trees and shrubs.<sup>4,6</sup>
- ▶ Try to reflect local surroundings (e.g., tree stumps, rocky creeks, hills, streams) and incorporate designs that allow for multi-sensory experiences (e.g., hear wind through bushes, feel water, pick up leaves, dig in sand, climb a tree).<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Install raw items such as logs, boulders and rocks for rough and uneven surfaces and materials that can be manipulated like sand, dirt, gravel, water and sticks. Add more elements if your budget allows.<sup>1,4</sup>
- ▶ Features from the natural environment make playgrounds appealing, interesting, engaging and accessible to children and adults, such as trees, pine cones, sand and shells.<sup>1,4</sup>
- ▶ Add pieces that reflect and encourage creativity, building, art and music such as murals, sculpture, bongo drums, xylophones and chimes.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Grassy hills can turn to mud and dirt when accommodating large numbers of children so consider slope design to resist erosion.<sup>6</sup>

- ▶ Accessibility for wheelchairs and walkers and for every child regardless of physical or cognitive or mental ability. For example, measure well so all children can reach the musical instruments or consider the pathway surface type, width and slope.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Nature playgrounds do not cost more to build than traditional playgrounds. The budget can be spent on landscaping and creating play areas using natural materials rather than purchasing traditional manufactured playground equipment.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Nature playgrounds can require specialized design skills so a percentage of the budget should be apportioned for professional design services.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Build nature playgrounds to encourage play together – so that children welcome each other into learning and doing things together.



## Safety

- ▶ Nature playgrounds are designed to minimize fall heights. Climbing can take place on hills and fallen logs and slides that are built into hills.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Logs can be sanded to eliminate sharp edges. Vegetation without sharp leaves can be planted to decrease pointy branches.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Watch for and clean up broken glass, sharp objects and garbage.
- ▶ Use a variety of surfacing materials. This improves accessibility for people in wheelchairs, cushions falls to reduce injury and adds interest to the playground. Different surfaces can include grass (in areas where children will not trample it), sand (in sandbox areas), mulch/woodchips, and paths (stone dust, asphalt, mulch).<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Incorporate open sight lines so children are easy to supervise.<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ Meet playground safety standards, such as Canadian Standards Association (CSA). When designing you may want to use the services of a certified safety inspector or reputable company that develops nature playgrounds.<sup>10</sup>



## Community Example: City of Penticton's Discovery Park

The City of Penticton partnered with the South Okanagan Children's Charity to build Discovery Park at Skaha Park in the fall of 2013. Discovery Park transforms and incorporates natural resources into play equipment. For example, boulders from local rock quarries are combined with ropes to create climbing features and balancing logs are built from beetle-infested pine trees. There are musical instruments, earth berm slides, a playhouse, swings and an interactive water feature to educate and remind children that water is a valuable and limited resource. The name, Discovery, is intended to encourage children to use their imagination and to inspire them and others to use the natural playground as an escape from the constraints of everyday urban life.<sup>7, 8</sup>



## FOOTNOTES

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