

Natural Playspaces

What is a Natural Playspace?

Natural playspaces use 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, but natural playspaces offer unstructured activities for learning and spontaneous play.

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. Remember your own childhood. Where was your favourite place to play?



'Get down on your knees frequently and view the environment from a child's perspective.' (Miers, 1992).

Some activities that can take place in a Natural Playspace

Designed play spaces 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
- climbing
- rolling down hills
- growing plants for tasting and smelling
- Observing insects and animals
- digging patches
- exploring
- gravel pits for older children
- talking in quiet social areas
- moving around on interesting pathways
- riding a bike over bumps
- nurturing and observing worm farms and compost areas
- growing and exploring bamboo arbours
- adventure themes

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.

Natural Appeal

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



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”.

Quiet Areas

Quiet areas allow the child to interact with the environment, which encourages calmness and supports emotional development.

Dry Creek Beds

Natural slopes make great places for dry 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 dry creek bed can become a watercourse. Supervision is essential as a child can drown in 50mm of water. Also, be mindful that any loose materials can be picked up by a child.

Bike Tracks

Wheeled toys encourage social and imaginative role play as well as active play. Bike tracks with special features such as speed humps and a variety of surfacing finishes, give sensory stimulation and noises as children ride or wheel over them. Refer to *Kidsafe NSW* fact sheet titled *Bike Tracks*.

Kidsafe NSW has several publications available to assist with playground design including: *Plants for Playspaces*, *Concept Designs for Playspaces*

Kidsafe NSW Playground Advisory Unit

Digging Patches

Digging patches give children another medium to explore, which encourages imaginative and constructive, physical play. These can be designed into a corner and integrated with plantings and/or vegetable patches.

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 degrees. If possible, playspaces should be positioned in areas with shade from trees. If this is not possible then thought should be given to the introduction of shade structures or sails. Ensure the shade falls in the right place at the right time of day by conducting a shade audit. Contact the *Cancer Council New South Wales* for further information.

Unstructured Play Areas

These include unencumbered grassed areas for running, informal ball games as well as sloped areas for rolling. Do you remember how much fun it was to run down a grassy slope with your arms outstretched with the wind on your face? 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 on your part as well as a lot of enthusiasm. Planting can provide scents, textures, forms, colours and play props whilst also encouraging birds and wildlife to the playspace. Think about including sensibly arranged rocks and logs and incorporating sounds using wind chimes, wind socks or musical instruments.

Natural play environments provide not only settings for quality play but also offers diversity and educational opportunities for a child’s developmental needs.



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