

20 Ways to Create Natural Playscapes

Here are 20 ways to help you create a sensory-rich play space to stimulate healthy development, celebrate the changing of the seasons, and offer children a world of creative play and exploration.

1

Build hills

By changing the topography of a play area, you change the whole world. Hills, bumps, and berms all help to create places and plateaus to climb to, look out from, roll down, build decks on, mount slides into, and grow plants on. Children use all sorts of different muscles as they find a variety of ways to climb up or maneuver down. And remember, the hills don't have to be gigantic. A 3-foot to 5-foot-high hill is big enough to make a huge difference in a child's perspective.

2

Plant trees and shrubs in clusters!

Be sure to plant trees and shrubs strategically! Instead of plopping them formally in lines or neat rows (the way adults typically like to see them planted), group plantings to form small rooms, hidey nooks, hollows, secret spaces. These areas form perfect social-dramatic spots for children to gather in, alone or with friends. Well-arranged plants can become playhouses, hideouts, castles, planets, and far-off places. Your plantings also become wildlife habitats saying, "Welcome" to birds, chipmunks, butterflies, and fuzzy caterpillars.

3

Plant herbs — everywhere!

Herb gardens are a good first step, but consider 'smell-tuning' your playscape. Make different spots smell, look,

and even (gasp) taste differently. Break out of the herb garden raised planter box and sneak herbs into the funniest places. For example: put chocolate mint next to tunnels, chives near seating areas, lavender by the trike track, rosemary by the sand area, lemon balm on a hillside, and creeping thyme between stepping stones. Help create a mood in each play area by adding multi-sensory fragrances!

4

Plant for ALL seasons

If your children will be out in the playscape year round, the playscape should be interesting year round! Plants can help do this. Think about those plants that burst into blossom in the spring (fruit trees, forsythia bushes, and tulip bulbs). Think about vegetable and flower gardens in the summer. Think about the harvest in the fall (apples, squash, nuts, and pumpkins). Think about plantings for autumn color ('burning bush' shrubs and trees whose leaves explode into color such as Oak or Aspen). Think about trees for winter that have interesting bark, funky shapes of branches, and trunks when the leaves fall off, evergreen needles (and piney smells), or bright safe berries that last all winter. Ornamental grasses leave billowy plumes for winter enjoyment. What happens outside can become a learning opportunity and part of the indoor curriculum as well.

5

Keep existing trees and topography

Too often yards are flattened and trees removed during

building constructions and even playground installations. Protect the trees! It takes extra care and creativity, but an existing mature tree or a gentle hill can be your playscape's best natural feature. Think about how to incorporate these elements into new playscape designs. Enhance the hill with trails, bumps, and seating. Build a low 'tree house' deck around the base of the big tree. Put down a soft surfacing and (gasp again) let children climb the trees. Protect the trees!

6

Purchase the book Plants for Play

Robin Moore's book *Plants for Play* (MIG Communications, 1993) is a great resource for anyone thinking about incorporating nature into children's environments. Moore lists plants by their uses: fall color, spring interest, wind blocking, evergreens, sound features, plants that drop fun 'play props,' and much more. The book also gives a good list of toxic plants to avoid.

7

Create secret path circuits

Along with tricycle tracks, also think about sneaking in 'secret' paths that more subtly link different areas of the playscape. Children can run or hop along narrow trails that wind through plantings and along fences, past playhouses, and into sand areas. Try putting a path along the perimeter of the playscape — at ground level or even raised up using logs as a 'balance way.'

8

Vary the textures and materials

Different textures create different moods and experiences. Children use their bodies in different ways when traveling over varied materials. Try creating a path with stepping stones, wood chips, bricks, cobblestones, flagstones, log sections, colored gravel, concrete-molded pavers with fun items stuck into them (golf balls, mosaic tile, mirrors, Matchbox® cars, marbles, hand prints, dog prints), asphalt, cement, wood boardwalks. The list goes on . . .

9

Bring in natural elements

Instead of a static old playground make your playscape feel more like a park, a secret garden, a wooded getaway, or a mountain meadow. Bring in the natural materials! Look for sources of logs and boulders in your local area. Check with your city forester or town public works department. Large sections of an old tree can be used as a bench, a climber, a bug farm, or a balance beam. Smaller pieces can be used as 'loose parts,' such as building blocks or moveable furniture. (If they are big enough, lugging them around becomes an upper body workout in itself!)

10

Add benches and picnic tables

Strategically place child-sized benches and tables throughout the play yard. They can be used as resting places, watching spots, art tables, a snack area, a 'safe zone' for games, a stop-off point along a secret path, or a mud pie table in the sand area. Try to find natural wood or stone to use as a building material. The design could be rustic, formal, or as simple as a smooth boulder or carved log. When looking for garden benches and tables, shop at a lawn and garden store or nursery owned by local people — you help the local economy and you may even get a special discount for the project.

11

Build a HUGE sand area

Create a gigantic sand pit that offers the wild play opportunities of the beach rather than the limitations of a sand box. Simply dig a hole and pour in clean washed sand, or line the pit with log sections, railroad ties, or boulders. Be sure to rake the sand daily to keep it debris-free. Because of their small size, sand boxes often have to be covered because of licensing requirements. But because of the large quantity of sand in sand 'areas' they can often be left uncovered. If you must cover it, think about using light mesh fabric that lets in air, sunlight, and rainwater and is easy for teachers to handle. Add boulders, mud pie tables, and small decks for fun dramatic play and construction possibilities. With

young children, sand often 'travels' to fun places like playhouses with benches and counters. Here's a hint: place your playhouses in the giant sand area and let children bring in as much sand as they want! It's the perfect place to build sand stews and other fun concoctions . . .

12

Install water

Water is one of the greatest play and experimentation elements for young children. Although standing water is not allowed on the play yard for health and licensing reasons, there's an easy solution: don't let it 'stand'! Recirculating fountains can safely act as a calming, dripping discovery point on the playscape. Connect a 'diverter valve' to your fountain to allow the water to drain each day or each time a class leaves the playscape. Another way to use water is to introduce it to the sand area (what could be better?). The process can be as simple as adding a hose line out to the sand area. If you want to get more formal, have a plumber install a water line from your building and set up a push-button pump that trickles water through a log into the sand for the ultimate in creative dam and river building projects. Simple drainage underneath the sand will help the water from pooling.

13

Add art

Children's art, teachers' art, parents' art, local artists' art — children should be surrounded by touchable, huggable, changeable, creative contraptions for play. Think about adding sculpture: benches, whirligigs, concrete abstract animal forms, chain-sawed logs, and sound elements. Add mosaics: murals, stepping stones, wall tiles, benches, and tables. Paint a mural. Build a dance stage. Create a messy outdoor art space for daily creations with water nearby for easy cleanup.

14

Create soundscapes

Sound can be an enchanting creator of moods and melodies for your playscape. Just as you will plant

different fragrant herbs in different spots, install different sound elements as well! Create ambient sounds by hanging wind chimes in trees; spice it up and add metal, wood, AND bamboo chimes throughout the playscape. Hide tiny bells in bushes and on tree branches that children can jingle. Install Talk Tubes made from plumbing supplies so children can throw their voices to other parts of the play yard. Build listening cones from traffic cones and mount them to fences to hear the world outside the playscape. Build giant 'thunder drums' out of steel or plastic barrels. Make mallets from dowels with softballs on the end and attach them permanently to the drum with rope or cable. Most importantly: use REAL instruments and beautiful materials! Too many children's music toys sound clunky and clanky. Offer children sound exploration opportunities that ring and resonate deeply in the body and sound harmonious to the ear. (You'll appreciate it too!)

15

Bring in the birds

Invite birds into the playscape by adding feeders, birdbaths, and birdhouses. The birds will thank you by setting up house, building nests, laying eggs, and having babies. Imagine the questions, curiosities, and learning opportunities! There are even birdfeeders that can be attached to classroom windows with suction cups, to bring birds close to the children during inside time. Don't forget that sunflowers and other plants make great natural birdfeeders, the good old-fashioned way!

16

Build it yourself (and ask for help)

A playscape should be a family and community affair. It should be built with loving, caring hands. It should be built with local materials, and changed and rearranged on a regular basis. And guess what? You can do it yourself! Just like an Amish barn raising, the playscape can be done with volunteer labor and donations from the community. First you need a 'Master Plan' of what you want to do. Then form a playscape planning committee to start organizing the community-built

construction days (a long weekend up to five days). Break the committee down with people in charge of locating materials, labor, tools, and (perhaps most importantly) food. Not only will you save money building it with volunteers, but it also becomes a wonderful community-building and friend-making opportunity right in your own back yard.

17

Creative maintenance

So you've built this beautiful outdoor fantasy garden. Who is going to do the upkeep? Well, you're not finished being creative yet. Maintenance does not have to fall on the shoulders of staff if you bring people in to help. First of all, allow the children to participate in taking care of the plants. It will be a wonderful learning opportunity. Invite retired residents to come in to help tend to the yard and spend time with the children. Schedule parent maintenance 'party' weekends. Look into the community-service programs that many high school students are enrolled in. Often students are looking for ways to work a certain number of community service hours to fulfill class requirements. The same goes for college students. How about your local cooperative extension? Can you think of other possibilities?

18

Local business

Tell businesses that you are creating a very special place for children and need their help. More often than not local businesses will be happy to give you discounts or donations for such things as plants, lumber, topsoil, contracting work, plumbing, and pizza. Make up a material and labor wish-list and ask parents for contacts in the community who could help. When the project is successfully completed, write a letter to the newspaper thanking all of the people and businesses that helped. Many playscapes add memorial plaques that list all the contributors. Try all of this and you'll see: Community is a good thing.

19

Loose parts

Your new playscape will be a beautiful, changing, dynamic place, but once you're done it's important to add the main ingredient: loose parts. Loose parts are what you use in the classroom all the time: blocks, dress-up clothes, plastic animals, art supplies. They are what add the pizzaz to the play. Fill an outdoor storage unit with outside versions of all these things, such as: balls, blocks, parachutes, tricycles, shovels, brooms, sand sifters, turkey basters, milk crates, plastic pipes, bells, wagons, paint brushes, traffic cones, magnifying glasses, hoola hoops, cups, bowls, tubs, plastic vases, wood tools, washboards, butterfly nets. The list goes on and on and on and on . . .

20

Involve the children in the dreaming

The playscape planning and creation can be a big part of your curriculum and the children should be involved each step of the way. More than simply asking them "What do you want on your playground?", immerse them in the concept of natural playscapes and the materials that are used to make them. First, tell them you are building something special, something natural, something more like a children's garden or park than a typical playground. Take them on field trips to local parks for walks and talks. Look at creeks, fountains, trees, and boulders. Have them draw what they experienced. Ask them what kinds of things they'd like to bring back to their own playscape to play on. Set up the sensory table with earth-based materials such as topsoil, sand, smooth rocks, twigs, branches, water, mud, and leaves. Talk about the natural materials in a natural playscape. Build an indoor 'natural playscape' by making cardboard trees and bushes, fabric waterfalls, and papier-maché boulders to play with. Have the children draw the designs of what the outside space could look like, then build models together. Have fun with this. Let the children's curiosity lead you. Make it a long-term part of the curriculum.