



SENSES

Through our senses the world appears.
Buddha

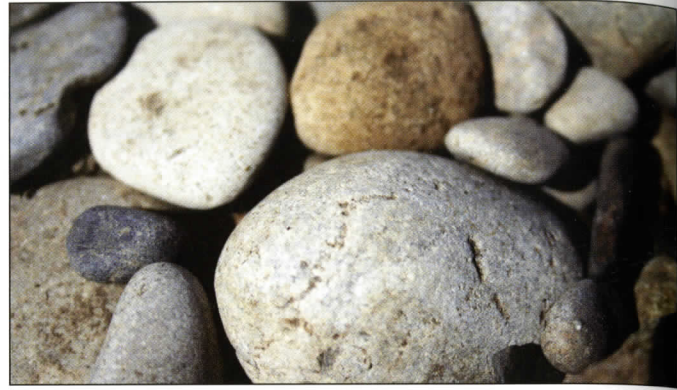
Warm sun on faces. Squishy mud between toes. Crunch of a freshly picked carrot. Our senses gather information about the world and how it works. We use our senses every day as we make our way in the world — smelling, tasting, hearing, and looking. How do you know what an ice cube feels like? You touch it. *It's cold!* The chirp of a bird? You hear it. *It's a song!* How do you know the fragrance of a rose? You smell it. *Sweet and heavenly!* How about the flavor of an apple? You taste it. *Delicious!*

The senses of young children are especially alert. Each sense gives children information about their environment — how it sounds, how it feels, how it smells, what it looks like. The senses tell us where we are.

I'll always remember a story a woman told at a playscape workshop in Indiana. She lived in a part of town with close neighbors sharing an alleyway. All the

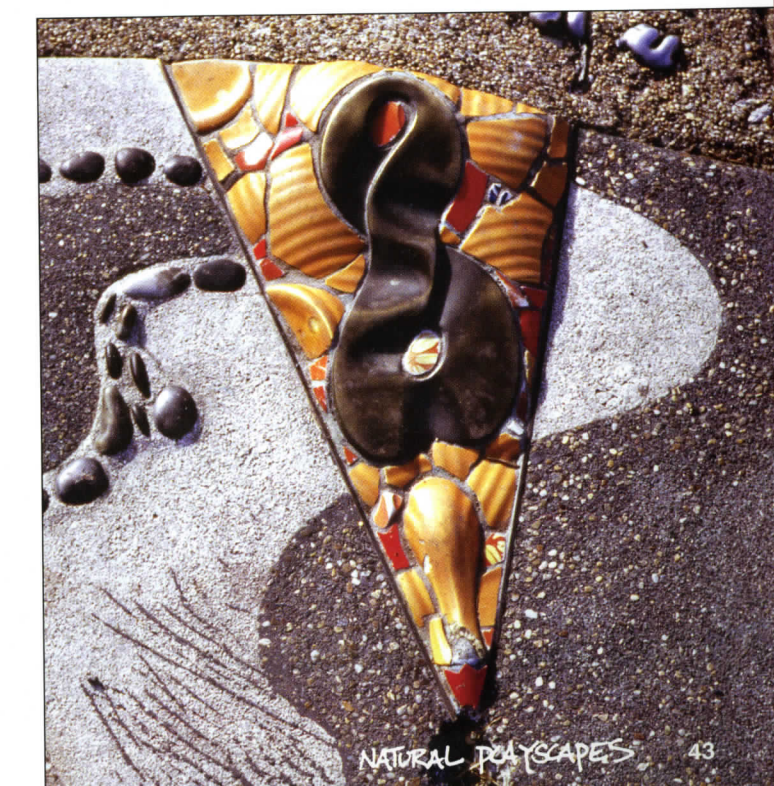
kids would get together; some days they would gather in one backyard, some days in another. One friend was blind and yet would always meet there with everyone else. She often wondered how he got there all by himself. One day on the phone she offered to walk him to a friend's backyard, but he said, "No!". He knew how to get to Jimmy's house: walk in the alley until you smell Mrs. Johnson's roses on the left. Take a right and go until you hear the Jones' retriever, Nellie, barking. When you feel the soft evergreen bushes against the fence, that's where Jimmy's gate is. He knew the route by heart, by his senses. Can we give such a sensory-rich description of our surroundings?

I'll bet your children can. It's how they know the world. Every outdoor play environment should be loaded with sensory elements, and later in the book we'll look at how to make that happen. But first let's take a minute to explore the world of the senses.



Touch

Grass and sand. Marbles and wood. Flowers and stones. They each feel different when you touch them. Textures have moods. Textures have feelings. Textures are the visual and tactile spice of life! Children need a variety of natural, textured materials literally at their fingertips. What can you include in your playscape that feels rough like sandpaper or smooth like silk? Your playscape should be a medley of textures, from the gentle softness of Lamb's Ear — a perennial plant with fuzzy leaves that are fun to touch — to a shade tree's rough shaggy bark. A playscape pathway may be made from mosaic tiles or zigzag brickwork that children can hop on from here to there. Be creative. Fill your space with tactile surprises for children to discover and love.

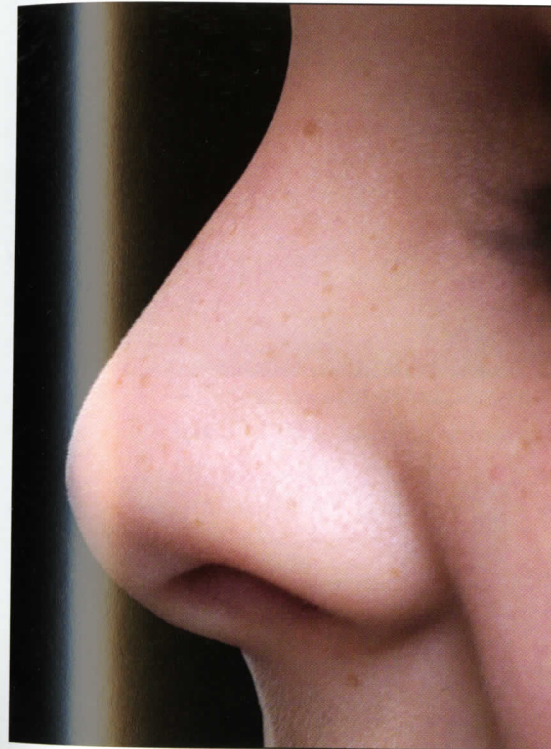
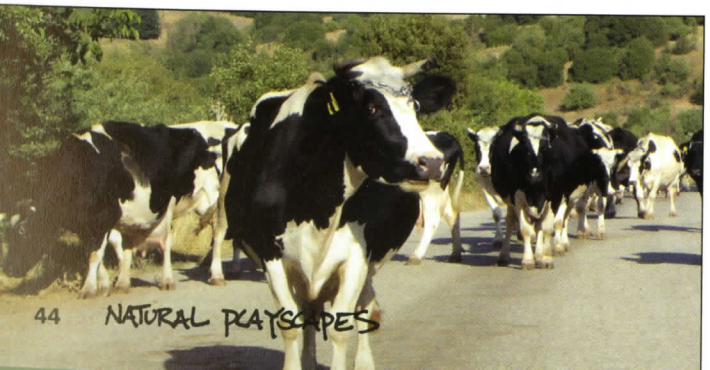


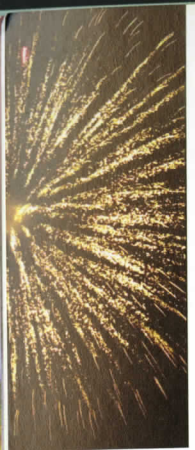


Smell

Lavender. Mint. Pine. Apple blossoms. Onions. Wood fire. Mommy's perfume. Whether up close and personal or drifting gently in the background, aromas help create a *sense of place* and mood in every environment. You can add scents to a child's environment by planting an herb garden. Try a variety of plants. The next exciting step is to *break out of the planter box*. Plant herbs everywhere! Each smell creates its own atmosphere that surrounds children as they play. Think of it as 'smell tuning' your playscape: first think about the different areas of your outdoor space and then match a different smell to each spot. Many people create mint areas, filled with spearmint and peppermint plants (one of my favorite varieties is *chocolate mint*). A relaxing 'take a break bench' could be surrounded by lavender — a calming spot for adults as well.

While you're at it, don't be afraid to have fun and mix it up a little. One area could be shaded by fragrantly flowering fruit trees. Another spot could be eye-wateringly filled with chives, onions, or even garlic. Whew! There's a mood swing! But that's perfect, because it's important for children's spaces to be alive with a wild variety of smells — alive with the spices of life!





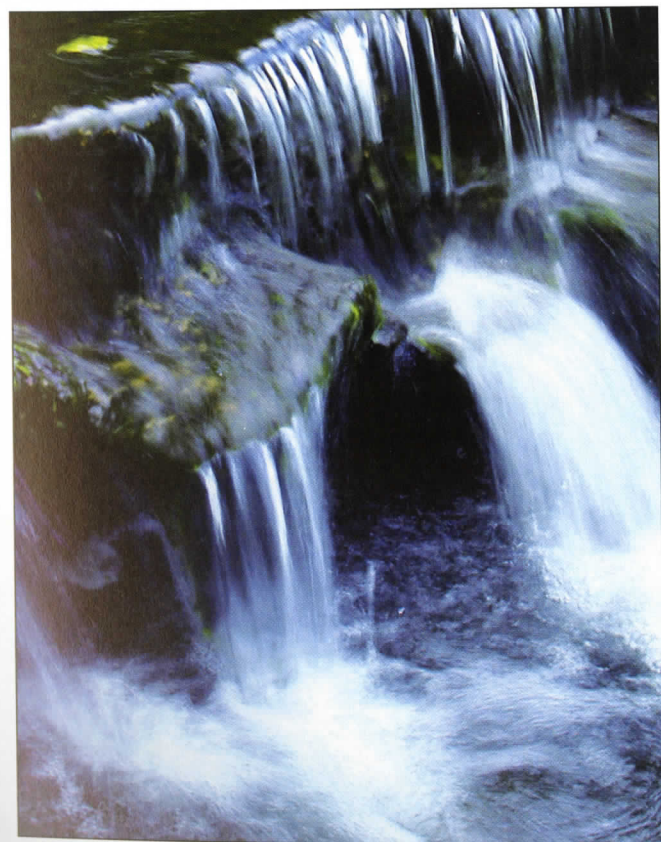
Listen

Pop. Ring-a-ling. Whoosh. Boom. Clang. Chime.

Shhhhh . . .

Listen right now. What sounds do you hear? There in the background are the sounds that engulf our daily experiences and create the atmosphere of our lives. Sounds on the playscape also create atmosphere. A playscape is a symphony of sounds with children's voices leading the chorus. I can hear laughter beneath trees as wind rustles the leaves overhead. Delicate windchimes may add a 'twinkle' to trees. Bamboo windchimes clunk out a different tune. Like the rush of a waterfall or the silence of the woods, your outdoor environment can be filled with sounds that shape the mood and feeling of each area. You can think of this as creating a 'Soundscape' — a landscape of sound.

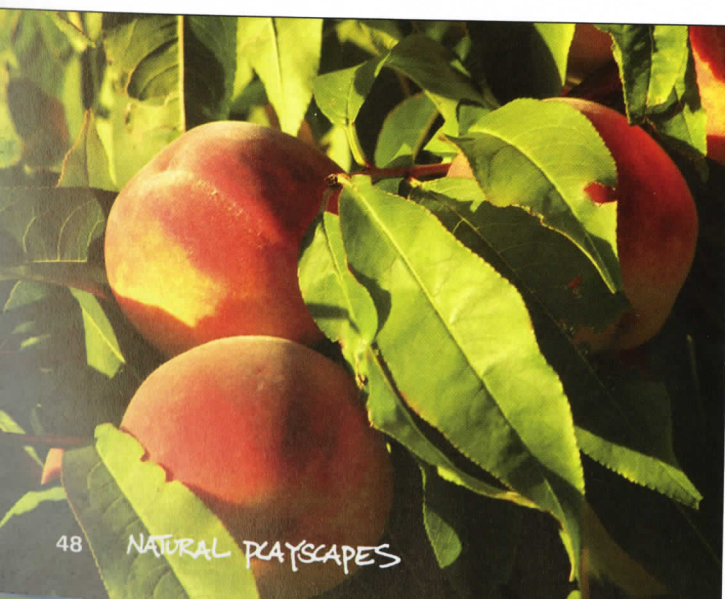
There are many ways to do this. Sound can be a main attraction by including musical instruments outdoors such as sturdy metal drums, wooden marimbas, and gongs (even a set of good ol' pots and pans will do the trick). Sound can also be used as a pass-by event. Place sound elements in spots where children come together to play. As children flow in and out of these areas they may bump into or jostle musical surprises. Cowbells, rattles, or small ringing bells can be hidden in shrubs or on fences or gates. The sounds should match the types of play in those locations. Loud sounds can match loud play. Soft sounds fit better in quieter areas. A third way to use sound is by letting it create a 'background' mood. Windchimes do this delightfully. Select different types, tunings, and materials to create different moods and music for your soundscape.





Taste

"Yum! That tastes sweet." "Yuck! It's sour!" The tongue doesn't lie. For young children (and adults) the world is the perfect place to have a taste. And we all have our favorite tastes. Strawberries in summer. Hot chocolate in winter. Pumpkin pie in fall. I can't think of a better thing to do with an apple pie than to eat it. Children not only have a keen sense of taste, but also a strong curiosity. With some simple planning, tasting can become a special part of the greater learning experience. Asking your children "where does food come from" may lead you many places. They may be surprised to find out that it lives and grows . . . in dirt! Every outdoor children's environment should have a small vegetable garden that children help tend. Carrots, peas, and oregano all have a story to tell — each with a delicious ending. Dandelions make flavorful salads and mint makes nice tea. Have fun. Select your plants thoughtfully. Teach children what is safe to eat. Pick snack time treats from your own yard and garden. Bon appétit!



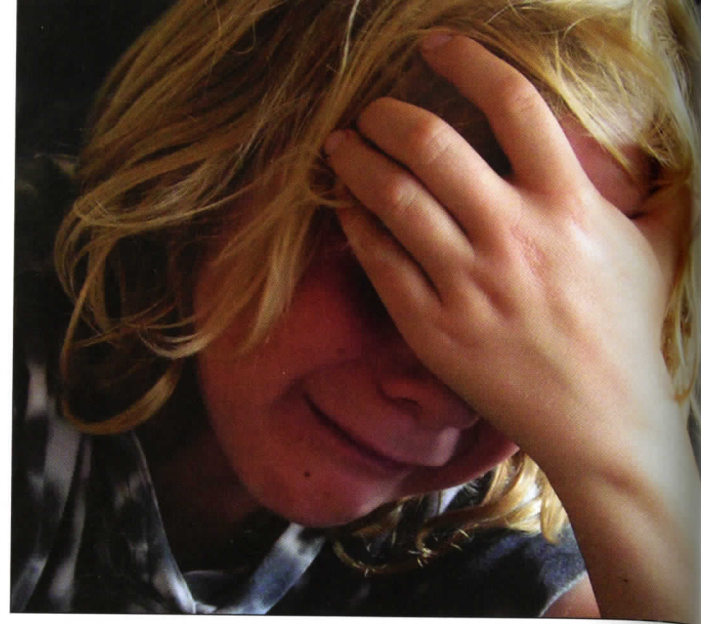


Look

What's in front of you right now? What colors, shapes, and forms do you see? The natural world is full of images and interesting patterns. What do they look like? The art of seeing is the art of noticing the details of life. With their eyes, children notice what's around them and see new things each day. What do their eyes see in their outdoor environment? What do they notice and look at? They may see puffy clouds in the sky, birds landing in a tree, a grasshopper in a garden, or a snowflake in winter.

Beauty and surprise should be the basis of every child's environment. Choose materials that are complex and rich. Install sculpture and art. Every direction a child looks should be filled with materials and structures that inspire curiosity and delight. Bright autumn leaves celebrate the season. The red of a ladybug stands out in the grass. The mud of a puddle makes a deep brown splash. Trees have faces. Boulders look like dinosaur eggs. The wooden playhouse is a magical cabin. With thoughtful care, you can add many layers of sights to discover. A hidden mirror may reflect a child's happy surprise. Marbles molded into sidewalks shine like jewels. The whirl of a sunflower face hints at universal patterns. The secrets are all here to be discovered. All we have to do is look. Notice. See?





Soul

Children experience the world with their whole being — body, spirit, energy, minds, hearts, compassion, tears, laughter, anger, pride, learning, understanding, love, and soul. Children play, grow, and feel the world around them intensely. Events burst with joy or end in tears. Their outdoor space should be a swirl of spirited delights and playful discovery. Some places on your playscape should provide a rush of excitement. Other spots can offer the solace of calm. The elements you choose should be magical and made of honest, natural materials. Carved wood sculpture suggests something deep. Ceramic tiles and mosaics sparkle as imaginations soar. Living plants befriend children and create atmospheres from peaceful to wild. Environments for children are sacred places. They speak to the spirit. They are made of soul.

