

Natural Playspaces

What is a Nature Play?

Nature play actively engages children with nature and its elements. Children touch and interact with the natural environment in their everyday play.

According to AS 4685.0: *Playground equipment and surfacing*, nature play is defined as:

“the elements of a playground consisting of natural, non-manufactured items that are incorporated into the playground, including items such as logs, boulders, plant materials and surfaces, changes of level and other landscape elements.”

Benefits of Nature Play

Play is a vital part of childhood and growing up. Research indicates that natural environments and outdoor play are beneficial to children in many ways.

A well-designed playground entices children to play and learn key developmental skills. Providing children with an outdoor learning environment incorporating areas for quiet, creative, active and stimulating play will allow children to learn while using their imagination, to be spontaneous, curious and resourceful.

Accessing nature is an important strategy for building resilience, buffering stress, and recovering from adversity. Natural elements are diverse and the play opportunities are open-ended. Many offer the benefit that children can manipulate them for their own play purposes.



Nature play activities include:

- Playing with water and sand
- Playing with loose parts and found items
- Climbing
- Rolling down hills
- Growing plants to smell and taste
- Observing insects, animals and birds
- Nurturing and observing worm farms
- Digging patches
- Discovering and imagining
- Constructing in gravel pits (for older children)
- Talking about nature
- Being still and quiet
- Exploring interesting pathways
- Riding a bike over bumps
- Building arbours and tee pees



Considerations

Unlike manufactured products and materials, natural elements may create activity that is unpredictable. Children develop risk assessment skills as they negotiate and navigate the natural environment. They build resilience as they learn to adapt their behaviour to the play setting.

Natural play elements in a playground are subject to the requirements of AS 4685.1. Where the requirements of the Standard cannot be applied to natural elements, a risk benefit assessment will determine the suitability of and any risk associated with the element. Refer to the information sheet titled *A Risk Management Approach*.

It is not necessary to design the whole playspace to include all natural features. Swings, slides and fixed equipment can still be included and are valuable assets in a playground. In addition to trees, smaller plants and shrubs, pots, tyres and tubs may be used to contain natural materials for play such as stones, sand, soil etc. Raised garden beds and small tubs can be used for children to grow flowers and vegetables.

When planning a natural playspace ensure that:

- Australian Standards for playgrounds are considered i.e adequate falling space/impact areas and playground surfacing are provided around higher features
- Play value is optimised
- Clear pathways are provided
- Non-toxic plants are selected and plants with sharp or spiky features are avoided
- Loose parts such as small logs, leaves, seed pods, pine cones etc. are readily available for children to incorporate in their play



Undeveloped Natural Environments

An area set aside where natural elements are largely undisturbed encourages children to discover more about their environment.



Components of a Natural Playspace

Open Green Spaces

These include unencumbered grassed areas for running and informal ball games as well as sloped areas for rolling. Open spaces encourage spontaneous play such as tag or ball games that often appeal to older age groups.

Creek Beds

Natural slopes make great places for creek beds. These areas can be planted out with strappy, leafed plants to simulate a natural dry creek bed environment. If you include a tap at the high end, the creek bed can become a watercourse. Ensure adequate drainage is provided to prevent pooling of water. Select pebbles and stones appropriate for the children's age eg. use large pebbles if children are under 3 years of age.

Digging Patches

Digging patches give children another medium to use their imagination through constructive and physical play. These can be established in a corner and integrated with plantings and/or vegetable patches. Ensure that the site is free of contamination prior to construction. The most suitable type of soil for digging patches is a 50:50 sand soil blend.

Quiet Areas

Quiet places let children feel hidden from view or create an opportunity to be alone or with a friend. Hiding or being out of view can be fun, however adult supervision is essential so that children can still be seen or heard and not at risk.

Children who may be overwhelmed by the playground can benefit from time apart from hectic environments to reflect and regroup. These areas allow a child to take time out and interact with nature. Provide different textured materials in this area for children to touch and explore. This encourages quiet play, mindfulness and supports emotional development.

Tree Climbing

Climbing trees increases ability to understand and negotiate risks. As children play together in a tree, their social, creative and imaginative skills are enhanced. A tree gives them direct contact with nature and the tactile experience of touching different barks and leaves. They get a different perspective on their world. Refer to the information sheet titled *Tree Climbing*.

Rocks and Boulders

Creative placement of rocks and boulders throughout a playspace can provide users with easy to challenging "routes." Playing on uneven heights and surfaces helps children to sharpen their coordination and balancing skills. Children learn scrambling, climbing and navigation skills. Rocks and boulders are a favourite place for children of all ages to explore, hang out and have fun.

Rocks and boulders can be great for surrounding sandpits and digging patches.

Incorporated into a mound or embankment, climbing rocks and boulders are excellent for building upper and lower body strength.

When installing into a playspace, ensure rocks and boulders are buried into the ground with at least 1/3 of the boulder mass being below ground surface. Make sure boulders are stabilised (e.g. use cement mortar) so that no movement occurs as children and adults travel over them. Ensure any sharp edges are rounded or smoothed off.

Imaginative Areas

These areas are often the most neglected part of children's playspaces. They can be inexpensive to create, only requiring some imagination and enthusiasm.

Plantings can provide scents, textures, forms, colours and play props whilst encouraging birds and wildlife to the playspace.

Incorporate sounds using wind chimes, trickling water, wind socks or musical instruments.



Inclusivity

Where possible, reduce physical barriers through the use of good travel surfaces and easy access such as wide, well maintained pathways. Provide shaded rest areas by maintaining existing trees, transplanting mature trees or planting them for future generations. Select materials that provide opportunity to explore nature through senses.

Textural differences in leaves, sands, pods and nuts can create fantastic play props. Fragrant plants, wind chimes, a gently trickling water feature can be used to indicate particular areas of the playspace (especially for the blind or visually impaired).

Planting

Trees, shrubs and groundcover play a number of roles in a playspace. Trees and shrubs can be used as wind breaks, to provide shade, moderate the temperature, reduce glare, define play zones as well as an educational tool.

Plants can be used to create private, hidden spaces with a “sense of place” whilst still allowing adults to watch on from afar. There is a fine balance between a space that is pleasantly secluded and one that is remote and hidden away.

Avoid plants with sharp thorns, leaves or spikes, poisonous species, or those with foliage, flowers and seeds that are a choking hazard. Avoid species notorious for limb dropping.

Natural Shade

Shade is imperative for all playspaces. If an area feels uncomfortably hot or glary it will not be used. Trees provide the best shade quality, filtering sunlight and lowering summer temperature by an average of 8-10°C. If possible, playspaces should be positioned in areas with seasonal shade from trees or hedges.

Natural Appeal

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

To see Award winning playspaces go to: <https://kidsafe.com.au/playspace-design-awards-previous-recipients/>



Inspection and Maintenance

As both manufactured and natural timber elements may be features in a natural playspace, it is important to regularly check for wear and tear, cracks and splintering.

- Surfaces need to be maintained so that children have a soft landing spot
- Tree houses, wooden furniture, and bridges need to be examined to ensure that the wood hasn't rotted or splintered and that they are still intact and stable
- Trees need to be inspected for weak branches
- Tree stumps and logs need to be checked for decay
- Check strength and stability of items/structures built by children. If there is potential for a serious accident, it is important for adults to intervene.
- Check regularly for hazards such as toxic plants or wasp nests

References and Resources

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Grow Me Safely - <https://www.kidsafensw.org/growmesafely/>

Kidsafe NSW information sheets - <https://www.kidsafensw.org/information-sheets/playground-safety/>

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