



What Makes Good Nature Play?

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The best nature-based, childhood play is unstructured and spontaneous — just as it historically occurred. Today, though, children's lives are much more controlled and scheduled, parents worry more about their children playing outside without supervision, the hypnotic allure of electronic play is pervasive, and wild spaces suitable for free play are less common in family neighborhoods. As a result, spontaneous nature play is hard to achieve.

To begin to effectively restore such play to childhood, it is important to understand what characteristics make that play most powerful. Based on a review of the research, Green Hearts believes that there are three key aspects of impactful nature play:

- ♥ The right kind of places;
- ♥ The right kind of activities; and
- ♥ The right kind of frequency.

The right kind of places are what author-naturalist Robert Michael Pyle calls "rough ground:" patches of nature that are readily available to kids and that are not tightly controlled or restricted. No great natural preserves are needed, just small places where kids can still dig holes, collect specimens, climb trees, and skip rocks. Ideally these should be places where children can truly play with nature, not just in it.

The right kind of activities are unplanned, free-form, creative play in natural settings — play that kids make up as they go, and that engages them directly with nature. Adult-guided nature hikes, commercial playground equipment, and school field trips do not fill this need. Rather, it is more about letting children just "muck around" in woods, meadows, or creeks.

The right kind of frequency is the most difficult aspect to achieve. Historically, children's outside play was almost a daily occurrence. Kids would come home from school, grab a snack, and go outside to play. On Saturdays they'd go out in the morning, with a

mandate only to get home "before the street lights come on." In surveying the origins of conservation values, researcher Louise Chawla noted that the special places where people formed a first bond with the natural world "were always part of the regular rhythm of life."

That goal — **the regular rhythm of life** — sets a very high bar for nature play — one that may not be realistic for most kids. However, it is vital to recognize its importance. Getting a child to play outdoors once every month or two is no more likely to have lasting impact than is an adult taking a baby aspirin once per month as a heart medication. Of course, a single and powerful "wow" experience outdoors may permanently change a child's values and perspective; that does occasionally happen. But if you want children to reliably get the full benefits of nature play, it needs to happen frequently — probably at least once or twice per week.

When we understand these three critical parameters of nature play, we can begin to identify and design child activities that simultaneously reflect all three. Amidst the pressures and restrictions of modern childhood, this will not be easy — but our children will be the better for it!

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