

A Priority for Play?

Which is most essential for the healthy development of children: learning or play? That is a false choice, of course — both are crucial, and they are commonly intertwined. However, that doesn't mean they are interchangeable, or that one or the other isn't more important during certain periods of childhood. This article shares Green Hearts' perspectives on these issues.

“Play is a child’s work,” says the familiar maxim. Indeed, for as long as our species has existed, human children have grown up with play at the center of their growth and development. Play fosters an almost limitless range of valuable experiences. It is where children first learn how to get along with other kids, how to take risks, how to test simple hypotheses, and how to challenge their own physical abilities — among endless other adventures. All of these facilitate early learning and development in its many forms: social, emotional, creative, physical, and intellectual.

Social play — i.e., with other children — sparks an especially broad range of development, including the abilities that we often refer to as “people skills.” We know these are crucial for life success, and that children learn and practice them at play: when they squabble over a toy, agree to rules for a made-up game, or give a helpful boost to the playmate who can’t quite make it up into the tree.

In fact, all play involves learning — albeit usually unconsciously. But not all learning involves play. Some learning focuses solely on the cognitive,

academic skills which children must master in a modern society. Basic competency in reading, writing, speaking, and mathematics is vital if a child is to mature into a fully productive member of society.

However, these critical abilities are not being sufficiently mastered by all American children. As a result, the U.S. educational system has been placing a greater emphasis on basic academic skills, and measuring their attainment through standardized tests. This emphasis has been *de facto* applied across the entire K-12 grade spectrum. This apparently assumes that a sharp focus on cognitive skills is equally appropriate at all ages — something that is contradicted by research on human development.



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MORE Nature in Omaha

A committed group of Omaha non-profits and individuals have banded together to help bring more nature-based play to the children and families of Omaha. Metro Omaha Resources for Exploring Nature — a.k.a., *MORE Nature*, had its first organizing meeting last spring, and is now about to begin a new slate of nature play activities and adventures for the public. Guiding the initiative’s growth has been a steering committee made up of representatives from Green Hearts, the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD), the Omaha Children’s Museum, the Henry Doorly Zoo, Hitchcock Nature Center, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, plus individuals Helen Bartee and Janis Dwyer. Lauritzen Gardens

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Escaping the Bee Gees

I'm in route to a speech, eating breakfast in the Memphis airport. The café is nearly deserted, but I feel like I'm among friends — for the piped-in music takes me back to high school. It's the Bee Gees' early hits: pleasant but forgettable pap from a trio of Australian siblings. In Memphis. *Memphis, Tennessee*. One of the great music cities of the western hemisphere. A city that can claim Elvis, W.C. Handy, B.B. King, Otis Redding, and Sun Studios in its stellar acoustic history.

And I'm having breakfast with the Brothers Gibb.

I was experiencing the homogenization of America. Not only wasn't the music indigenous, the diner décor could have been from any restaurant, anywhere, and most of the airport stores were the same ones I find in St. Paul, Pittsburgh, and Phoenix — if not in name, then at least in style and merchandise.

This affliction is now widespread. Every mall seems the same. Every office park must be taken from the same style manual. Every little playground has the same equipment. Every new suburban home sits on a quarter-acre lot with a spindly tree, bland swaths of lawn, and a few boring shrubs hugging the foundation.

This is not good for conservation. Why? Because just as no one pays attention to milk-toast elevator music, neither does anyone take note of boring, cookie-cutter landscapes. Green Hearts wants folks to care about their surroundings — especially the natural ones. We want kids and adults to love nature, and to feel a bond with it. But first they need to at least notice it! Only then can a personal connection begin to form.

When Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "The future of mankind is dependent on every human being intimately associated with a half acre of ground," he reflected a crucial truth: personal bonds come from intimacy. Can we feel intimate with something that is one of hundreds or thousands of near-exact replicas? I doubt it.

What Wright was talking about is a *sense of place*: a feeling of belonging to a unique landscape or location that one knows well, and has a real connection to. That bond can help develop a personal identity, create a broader sense of community, and even spark a little patriotism — as well as fuel environmental concern. But it must be nurtured by intimate experiences with land and nature — experiences that are most powerful during childhood. A true sense of place comes from being out on the land, day after day, with no agenda other than to explore, discover, and enjoy.

Many of us had such places as children. They were wild and magical to us, and we spent a lot of time playing in them. The hollow tree we hid in, the stream with crawdads to catch, the shallow cave, the perfect climbing tree: these gave us a sense of place for our particular corner of the earth. It was a place we felt a bond with, a place uniquely our own — no matter the actual ownership or any "No Trespassing" signs.

Today childhood is different. The primary spaces where kids now play — family rooms and ball fields — look just about the same in Omaha as in Anaheim. The video games they play in Bar Harbor are the same as in Anchorage. Schoolyards in Minnesota, paved with turf grass and asphalt, are nearly identical to schoolyards in Mississippi. And suburban yards everywhere seem to be competing to be the most boring lot on their street.

Amidst such uniformity, how can parents help their young children to develop a unique sense of place? First, get them outside — a lot! Second, create diverse and "messy" yards for play. Not pristine lawns and formal rose beds, but digging pits, boulder piles, shrub hideaways, little streams and ponds, wildflower borders, insect gardens, and other enhancements that mimic the natural richness of their area and the play it can stimulate. This "kidscaping" needn't be expensive or difficult, just creative! So if you want your kids' backyard play to be something more than just the recreational equivalent of elevator music, create a diverse, kid-friendly home landscape that can help them develop their own enduring sense of place.

If I'd been treated to a little of Memphis' unique sense of place in that airport restaurant — perhaps Otis pleading *Try a Little Tenderness*, or Elvis belting out *Devil in Disguise* — my breakfast would surely have been more memorable. But hold the Bee Gees, please.

Green Hearts

Institute for Nature in Childhood

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization incorporated in Nebraska..

Mission Statement

Green Hearts' mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.

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A Priority for Play? *continued*

Nevertheless, this approach is now infiltrating the preschool years, as well. This undoubtedly seems like a good thing to many well-meaning people, since it is meant to develop skills that are important for the individual and for society.



In practice, though, the new emphasis on testing is crowding out other types of childhood development — ones that historically have been well supported by free play, including the nature-based play that Green Hearts champions. This change is a reflection of harsh reality: teachers, schools, school systems, and entire communities are now being judged by how well their students perform on the standardized tests.

Among the casualties of the new testing culture is recess, which is being reduced or eliminated in many schools in order to capture more time for academics and test preparation. According to a 2006 report, seven percent of public elementary schools in the U.S. already have *no* daily recess for first graders — a number that rises to thirteen percent for fifth graders. In fact, some new elementary schools are now being built without any playground space at all.

With recess' demise is lost one of the school day's best opportunities for children to practice and develop their social skills, not to mention the health benefits of regular physical activity *and* its proven positive impact on both cognitive performance and classroom behavior. Creative development — as traditionally advanced in school classes like music, art, and woodworking — is also being sidetracked. In both cases, the "villain" is the all-consuming emphasis on standardized testing, the powerful consequences it carries, and a corresponding lack of attention to children's "multiple intelligences."

In a parallel evolution on the home front, many parents have come to believe that their children's schooling must be augmented by out-of-school lessons in order to ensure the kids' future success. Afternoons and evenings are devoted to tutoring, language and music lessons, Tai Chi classes, organized sports, scouts, etc., etc. These activities are valuable individually, but when too many of them are piled onto a child's life, little time is left for unstructured, make-it-up-as-you-go play. And that's probably the most beneficial form of play, since it exercises multiple developmental skills

and abilities such as creativity, imagination, sharing, negotiation, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

We know that creativity and ingenuity have long powered America's industrial might, and that strong people skills are vital to personal success — but these abilities don't seem to have much standing in the U.S. educational system. Where are we stressing attributes like these in our children's growth and development? What ages are we choosing as the ones where a "whole child" approach will be used? How are we measuring kids' progress over a broad range of developmental abilities? Quite simply, we aren't.

No governmental unit assesses kids' social skills, inventiveness, or artistic expression. Only reading, math, and (soon) science are being measured — so that's where teachers, principals, and superintendents are focusing their time and efforts. What's being lost in the trade-off is hardly even being discussed. Vital but non-academic abilities simply do not count for much in our current public education system.

This doesn't mean that mastering academic skills is not essential for children. It surely is. But the other developmental areas are equally important if we are to remain a thriving, successful culture. And one of the most long-standing and powerful mechanisms for advancing those social, emotional, creative and physical abilities — *free play* — is vanishing.

Do we really need to choose between play and academics? Isn't there time and space in childhood for both? And are we sure that we are using the best methods to drive improved academic skills? Consider Finland, where formal schooling doesn't begin until

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Green Hearts' Website: At Your Service

Need an interesting fact about kids and nature, or a little inspiration about childhood from some of history's greatest minds? Or maybe you just want to learn a little more about this nature play stuff...

No problem: just visit www.greenheartsinc.org. You'll find information about Green Hearts' work, nature play in general, and nature preschools. Plus, the *Resources and Links* section includes Nature Play Factoids, our favorite Nature Play Quotes, and links to several of our colleague organizations that are doing great work around the country. And coming soon will be a downloadable version of Green Hearts' new *Parents Guide to Nature Play*.

Check us out on the web, and please don't overlook the chance to contribute to our work through the PayPal link!

A Priority for Play? *conclusion*

age seven, and then starts with school days that are only four hours long. Within that short period, each class meets for 45 to 50 minutes, and then the kids take a mandatory ten to fifteen minute outdoor recess before the next lesson. They get a longer recess at lunch, and they have less homework than American children.

This is a world apart from our own educational structure, yet by age fifteen Finnish students outperform children in *all* other industrialized countries in reading, math, and science. Do Finns understand childhood in ways that we do not? Is the U.S. approach to public education ignoring the research and best practices in child development?

"Today's young children are controlled by the expectations, schedules, whims, and rules of adults. Play is the only time they can take control of their world."

-- Sheila G. Flaxman (author and early childhood teacher/administrator)

Whatever the causation, childhood is mutating at an incredibly rapid pace. By virtually eliminating free play, we are conducting a massive experiment on childhood — and we don't even have a hypothesis about what the long-term results will be! Will our children grow up with stronger academic skills, and use their adult years to learn and perfect their other intelligences and developmental abilities? Or might we be creating a generation of institutional worker bees who will have basic job skills, but whose inventiveness, creativity, and artistic abilities have been squelched? Can we expect our children to develop a healthy and balanced set of life skills, if their childhood years are overwhelmingly devoted to academic performance?

Free play is central to Green Hearts' work, and we believe it is truly vital to childhood. As a conservation organization, our primary motivation is the knowledge that frequent, unstructured childhood play in natural settings has been shown to be the most common influence on the development of life-long conservation values. But we also recognize and celebrate the entire range of positive impacts that play offers for children.

When kids visit Green Hearts' future children's nature centers to run through tall grasses, climb trees, build dens, catch frogs, gather flowers, and jump in leaf piles, we will not test what they have learned. We will not try to squeeze creativity and ingenuity into a calibrated box, nor attempt to fit exuberant joy into an equation for governmental aid. We believe in the value of children's free play, and will do all we can to help parents and educators understand and share our commitment to it.

MORE Nature, *continued*

will also soon join the steering group. More than a dozen other local organizations attended the initial 2008 meeting, and are expected to be involved in future activities.



MORE Nature's first programs will be a series of "Nature Nights" and "Nature Days" for local schools and community groups. Included on this spring's schedule are Sandoz Elementary, Crescent Elementary, Franklin Elementary, Bryan Middle School, Lothrop Elementary, and the Westside Boys and Girls Club. Each of these events will feature several activity stations to help children and parents engage with nature — for example, learning how to fish, how to identify birds, and how to set up a simple tent.

MORE Nature is also helping schools to start or expand after-school nature clubs, will be offering parent workshops about nature play, and is sponsoring a community forum to build new support and partnerships for expanded nature play. In addition, the group is helping Green Hearts in the creation of a "Parents' Guide to Nature Play."

Similar city-wide collaborations for nature play are starting up across the country, fueled by a growing understanding of how valuable these outdoor experiences are for children. In the months ahead, *MORE Nature* will continue to expand its offerings, both borrowing from and contributing to these like-minded initiatives in other cities.



"We need to give them [children] time outdoors, where they can meet and savor the world that humans have not made — pill bugs on a sidewalk, a swarm of tadpoles in a puddle, a tree for climbing, a sky aflame with sunset, a kiss of wind."

— Scott Russell Sanders

More Kidscaping Tips for Your Yard

Children don't need sprawling open spaces for good nature play! A vacant lot, a little creek, or a neighborhood park can do just fine. But don't underestimate the nature play value of backyards, too — especially when parents enhance them for better play! Here are four more, easy, low-cost suggestions that can be done in most backyards. (You can find last issue's tips on our website: www.greenheartsinc.org.)

Shrub Dens

Children love small, enclosed spaces where they feel private and protected, yet still have a view out. Such outdoor "dens" can be formed by boulders, large logs, or simple wood construction. One of the best ways, though, is to plant a circle of dense shrubs, leaving a central opening plus an entry. Viburnums, dogwoods, chokeberries, and many other species can be used. Ask your local nursery for fast-growing, native shrubs with nice flowers and non-toxic fruits, plus good wildlife value. Then your child's den will always offer interest — even on days when it's not a clubhouse, a secret base, or a pioneer cabin!

Sunflower Houses

A den can also be created with fast-growing sunflowers. Clear an area of soil a few feet square, and add compost or topsoil if needed. Then plant sunflower seeds around the perimeter, leaving a gap on one side for an entry. Use a mixture of tall and short sunflower varieties, and alternate the seeds around the "walls" so each side will form a better screen. If you plant your seeds early in the growing season, by mid-to-late summer your children will have the most unique playhouse in the neighborhood. Plus, in autumn the birds will feast on the sunflower seeds — if you haven't roasted and eaten them yourselves!

Backyard Campouts

It may not be an exotic destination, but your own backyard is great place for a kids' overnight! All you need is a simple tent, sleeping bags or blankets, a flashlight, some snacks, and a nice evening. Extra food, bathrooms, and a rain refuge are just a few feet away, at your back door! This can be a real adventure for young children: backyards are exciting at night, aided by strange sounds and kids' active imaginations! A parent can share the tent, or older children can sleep out on their own (with parents just a shout away). For extra interest, time your campout to enjoy a meteor shower's "shooting stars." The best option is the Perseid shower, which is always in mid-August (the 2009 peak will come very early on August 12).

Campfires

A great addition to your backyard campout — or a good activity by itself — is a campfire. Kids love 'em! Portable fire pits are perfect for this, and are now widely available and affordable. Cook hot dogs or shish kebabs on a stick, make s'mores,* or just enjoy the ambiance of sitting around a fire — all are great fun for your children. And be sure to let them help build and tend the fire! With your guidance, this is the right way for them to learn how to handle fire properly and safely. Backyard fire pits make a great excuse to get the family outside, and who knows what else you'll experience while you're out there!

**If you somehow don't know about s'mores (as in, "Can I have some more?"): Toast a marshmallow on a stick, then quickly slide it between two graham crackers, along with a piece of plain chocolate bar. Let the marshmallow partially melt the chocolate. Consume. Repeat.*

Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, appreciate the work we're doing, and would like to stay informed about it, please support us with an annual membership! Every gift truly helps, and every one will be gratefully acknowledged.

Name _____ Email _____

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Membership Categories: ___ \$1,000 Founder ___ \$100 Supporter ___ \$25 Grassroots
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Mail this form and your check (made out to Green Hearts) to:

Green Hearts INC, 4502 South 42nd St., Omaha, NE 68107-1059

Thank you!

Planning Underway for Children's Nature Center!

Green Hearts' initial children's nature center is on the drawing boards! This first-of-a-kind resource will feature acres of wild habitats for explorations and play, plus a licensed nature preschool. Also included will be summer nature day camps and a variety of other community programs, all built around Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.

The project is being developed in partnership with the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD), on a 90-acre tract of NRD land known as Rumsey Station Wetlands. Located in the Omaha suburb of Papillion, this site offers a fine mixture of upland and floodplain woods, wetlands, and prairie, as well as nearby access to family neighborhoods and major traffic routes.

The landscape architecture firm, Big Muddy Workshop, Inc., is underway on preparation of the center's master site plan. Topographic, wetlands, and boundary surveys are complete, and have been

integrated into a detailed base map of the property. Discussions are underway with local governmental officials to address planning, zoning, and entry road requirements, and the actual construction site is being delineated.

Concurrently, architect Mike Hamilton, of Altus Architectural Studios, has begun work on the preliminary building design. By late spring, all the initial planning should be complete, giving us the information we need to develop realistic cost estimates. In the meantime, the NRD is preparing coordinated plans for wetlands restoration work on the westernmost portion of the property — land they purchased last summer to augment the site.

This first stage of planning is essential preparation for the future fundraising campaign that will be needed to turn Green Hearts' dream of a children's nature center into one of the country's most unique resources for children and conservation. Stay tuned!



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Bringing Children and Nature Back Together