

## *Creating Natural Play Environments*

by Marcie Oltman, Green Hearts board member

Early one spring while visiting a Minnesota child care center, I observed an interesting play scenario in the preschool playground. The setting was typical of many urban and suburban settings: a play yard with the standard pea gravel surface; a swing and slide apparatus; a small concrete patio with a “big wheel” tricycle or two, all surrounded by a chain link fence. Snow remnants and mud puddles were scattered about the yard but toys were still put away for the winter.

While most of the children were occupied on, waiting for, or arguing about the swings, a few children huddled around a small puddle on the opposite end of the playground. One boy, not content to stand idly by, pawed under the fence for a small twig. He brought his new tool back to the puddle and set about prodding and stirring. The other kids scattered to find more tools: a curled-up oak leaf, a chunk of ice, and of course, numerous small pebbles. Each was intent on testing their theories about how their tools affected the puddle and vice versa. More ice, leaves and twigs were added to the mixture, which soon became a reasonable version of stone soup. Meanwhile, at the swings, conflicts escalated and frustrations reached the boiling point.

This story illustrates many things: scarcity and conflict, resourcefulness and imagination, cooperation and competition. However, it is mostly about children’s affinity toward a world they are too often separated from — the natural world.

Safe, accessible places to play in nature are few and far between, and are in danger of disappearing altogether. Gone are the days we may remember from our childhoods, mucking about in the woods behind the house. Daily life now is a series of appointments and

schedules, and too often “outside” is the pavement between the car and daycare. The result is what author Robert Michael Pyle describes as “the extinction of experience” — children no longer engaging in open-ended play time, exploring special forested places, and creating whole new worlds with nothing more than their imaginations and the natural world around them. At best we are discouraging children from bonding with and becoming interested in nature. At worst, we are depriving children of reaching their full potential as individuals (Nixon, 1997).

Creating more natural play yards can be simple — a well placed hollow log for sitting, hiding or balancing — or elaborate, like specialized landscaping with hills and water and trees. Not only can natural areas be rewarding to play in, but to create as well.

One of the keys to developing a natural play area is to think about what children love to do, and think of how they would do it in nature. In the timeless “Creative Outdoor Play Areas,” Peggy Miller (1972) takes her cues from what children love to do. The following are suggestions for temporary or permanent ways to incorporate natural elements into child care center play yards based on what children love to do.

*continued on page 3*

### **Book Recommendation:**

#### **The Thunder Tree, by Robert Michael Pyle**

This recently re-printed 1993 classic is the story of Bob Pyle’s childhood spent exploring the semi-wild lands on the far edge of metastasizing Denver. Pyle’s youthful adventures bonded him to nature and set him on the path to becoming the acclaimed writer and ecologist that he is today. A good read!

## Huzzah for the Sophies!

First, foremost, and always, we must protect our children. This is cultural bedrock in America. And who could argue? Of course we protect our children. In fact, if faced with the terrible choice, most of us would lay down our lives for our sons and daughters. Yet many of us have struggled with a basic question: *What should we protect them from?* And with its more quarrelsome counterpart, *What shouldn't we protect them from?*

Sometimes parents are so quick “to the rescue” that they inadvertently limit their child’s longer-term growth. For example, do we protect kids from the near-term misery of eating their broccoli? Or from growing up with poor eating habits? Protect them from bumps, bruises, and broken bones — or from potential obesity and a lack of self-confidence?

Recently, a trip southward led me to a pleasant introduction with a charming, well-mannered young lady named Sophie: *tree climber extraordinaire*. At the ripe old age of eight, her ascension talents have barely been scratched — but nevertheless Sophie climbs trees throughout her well-established neighborhood. In fact, she’s on a personal basis with many of them, and she casually pointed out her favorite climbing tree to me.

Now just ponder that statement for a moment....

*Sophie has a favorite climbing tree!* How many American eight year-olds would I have to ask before I found another with a favorite climbing tree? I might need throat lozenges just to keep up the questioning! And in an ironic twist for those of us who grew up in an age when tree climbing was mostly a boys’ domain, Sophie’s mom tells a good story. It seems that Sophie

invited a boy playmate to join her in trunk traveling. He tried, but soon found that he did not have enough arm strength to do it — whereupon he announced that he didn’t really want to climb trees, anyway!

Speaking of Sophie’s mom, she’s not the least bit worried about her daughter’s tree climbing. In fact, she’s all in favor of it — along with walking to school, growing a garden, creating a backyard vine teepee, and generally fostering the kind of childhood that so many of us remember fondly, but which is now too rare.

Is Sophie endangered by *under*-protective parents? I don’t think so. There is risk in all aspects of life, yet we tend to focus only on the “new” or sensational ones, not the routine ones — even when they’re worse! Does any parent forbid their child to ride in a car because auto accidents are the biggest cause of accidental children’s death? Do parents boycott youth sports leagues because they are the top cause of emergency room visits by children? No to both, of course — yet we agonize over relatively miniscule risks to our kids like falling from a tree trunk or even just getting dirty!

Truth is, you may be hit and killed by a meteorite the next time you walk out the door. Do you worry about it and stay inside, or go on living your life despite the risk? If we protect our kids *too* much, they become vulnerable to different dangers — ones of omission, that can limit their experience of full and rewarding lives. Children *need* risk. It is an essential part of the growth process: learning to assess dangers, testing one’s own abilities, developing good judgment. What happens if they don’t practice those skills while they’re young? Will they still be trying to learn good judgment when they’re 16 and behind the wheel of a car?

And what does life inside a fear-driven protective bubble do to a child’s soul? An early British proponent of playgrounds, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, put it perfectly: “Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.”

No one should argue for intentionally putting kids in real, grave danger. That’s nuts. But it is important to discriminate between risks — i.e., challenges that children can see, assess, and decide whether or not to attempt — and hazards — i.e., unseen dangers that will only cause harm, not growth. Too often we lump the two together and thereby risk retarding the growth and future success of those who we love the very most.

So instead of spending hours of screen-zombie time assessing Mario’s risks in jumping from platform to platform, maybe — *just maybe* — our kids should be outside tackling real-world risks, and developing the same fortitude, confidence, and judgment as Sophie!

### 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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#### **Green Hearts INC**

*Offices shared with Big Muddy Workshop, Inc.*  
4502 South 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Omaha, NE 68107-1059  
402-344-8711 fax 402-344-8712

[kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org) [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org)

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## Ideas for...

<p><b>Moving</b> (jumping, leaping, hopping, balancing, etc.)</p> <p><i>Natural elements have different textures and sizes than manufactured equipment. This provides variety and challenge when children are testing and learning physical skills.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wooden planks</li> <li>• Tree stumps at varying heights set in the ground</li> <li>• Stacked hay bales</li> <li>• Discs (“tree cookies”) made from tree trunks for stepping stones</li> <li>• Flat landscaping rock or stone for stepping stones</li> <li>• Large dead trees with big branches trimmed, and anchored horizontally on the ground.</li> <li>• Small, medium or large landscaping boulders</li> <li>• Grassy hill for running or rolling</li> <li>• Small dry (or wet) stream or ditch</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pretending</b></p> <p><i>There are just some things that belong outdoors—boats, rafts and tents are among them.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Dug-out” canoes made of logs cut lengthwise and hollowed out.</li> <li>• Old row boats secured to the ground</li> <li>• Large tree trunk or log to pretend to be on a bus or fire engine</li> <li>• Large tent or lean-to made from branches</li> <li>• Play log cabin with wooden spoons, bowls</li> </ul>
<p><b>Digging in the soil</b></p> <p><i>Digging in the dirt is “real” work. Holes have to be dug, gardens hoed, hidden treasure found.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shovels</li> <li>• Wheel barrows</li> <li>• Hoes</li> <li>• Rakes</li> <li>• Buried treasures</li> </ul>
<p><b>Places to hide</b></p> <p><i>Everyone needs a place in nature to call his or her very own.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A small patch of tall prairie grass</li> <li>• Hollowed out tree trunk</li> <li>• Weeping willow or mulberry tree</li> <li>• Lilac bushes planted a few feet from the fence</li> <li>• Pole beans or morning glories trained in a tipi shape</li> </ul>
<p><b>Playing with water</b></p> <p><i>A must for every young child!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A hand pump and a small stream bed</li> <li>• A plastic “above ground” pond with real pond water and critters</li> <li>• Downspouts that empty into a small stream on rainy days</li> </ul>

As with all play equipment, careful attention to safety is imperative. Natural play areas should have the same safety considerations as artificial ones: height, stability, ease of supervision, surfacing materials and depths, weather factors, etc. For more information, contact the Consumer Product Safety Commission for a list of playground regulations. ( [www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/325.pdf](http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/325.pdf) )

Safety concerns and lack of nearby, accessible natural areas may prevent us from providing the freedom for children to explore nature as a part of daily play. But early childhood educators have the opportunity and honor to put nature back where it belongs — outdoors and in the hands of children!

### Resources:

- Handbook for public playground safety. 1998. Publication No. 325., U.S Consumer Product Safety Commission: Washington, DC.
- Miller, Peggy L. 1972. Creative outdoor play areas. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Nixon, Will. 1997. How nature shapes childhood. *Amicus Journal* Summer:31-35
- Pyle, Robert Michael. 1993. The thunder tree: Lessons from an urban wildland. New York: Lyons Press.
- Rivkin, Mary S.1995. The great outdoors: Restoring children’s right to play outside. Washington, DC: NAEYC
- Thornburg, Kathy R. 2001. From our President: Tag, sand, balls and memories. *Young Children* 56(1):4



# What is Green Hearts Doing for Nature Play?

*Green Hearts works around Omaha, around the country, and now even around the world on behalf of nature play — or, more accurately, on behalf of our children who need to be able to enjoy nature play! Here's a summary of our recent work.*

## Educational Advocacy

*A central part of Green Hearts' mission is teaching about the value of nature-based play and how we can restore it to modern childhood. In recent months we've enjoyed many opportunities for this work!*

- ♥ **Nebraska Dept. of Education:** webinar on nature play, with Dr. Julia Torquati (Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln).
- ♥ **Botanical Garden of the Ozarks and Ozark Natural Science Center, AR:** Public program on nature play.
- ♥ **Ozark Natural Science Center, AR:** Keynote talk for their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner.
- ♥ **University of British Columbia; North Vancouver School District; Capilano University; University of Victoria; and Vancouver Community College:** Nature play presentations for early childhood workshops and classes in British Columbia, Canada.
- ♥ **Nebraska Kindergarten Conference:** Keynote address (Kearney).
- ♥ **Luther College, IA:** Public presentation plus two guest classes about nature play.
- ♥ **Joint Conference of Colorado Wildlife Society and Colorado/Wyoming American Fisheries Society:** Featured presentation about nature preschools.
- ♥ **Go Out and Play! conference:** Presentation on nature play spaces for early childhood centers (Omaha).
- ♥ **Association of Nature Center Administrators, TN:** Facilitated conference session on nature play.
- ♥ **The Natural Phenomenon conference, New Zealand:** Keynote address and workshop on nature play.

## Coming Presentations:

- ♥ **Nebraska Recreation and Parks Association:** nature play workshop, with Chris Kiewa of Dimensions Foundation (York, NE; Dec. 2011).
- ♥ **Conference on the Value of Play:** Nature preschools workshop (Clemson, SC; February 2012; pending).
- ♥ **Gateway Children and Nature Connection, MO:** Keynote address (St. Louis, Mar. 2012; pending)
- ♥ **Tennessee Association for the Education of Young Children:** Keynote address (Nashville; Oct. 2012)

## *Please Become a Friend to Green Hearts!*

- Schedule us for a talk or workshop.
- Visit our website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org)
- Donate to support our work.
- Share this newsletter with a friend.
- "Friend" us on Facebook.

## Consulting

*Green Hearts lends its expertise to other groups that want to bring more nature play to their audiences. Recent clients have included the following.*

### **Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and**

**Natural Resources:** Green Hearts completed two manuals intended to assist PA State Parks with the possible development of nature-based preschools.

**National Audubon Society:** Green Hearts collaborated with NAS and the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation on the creation of a business plan for a possible network of nature preschools.

**SafeNet:** This Erie, PA domestic shelter completed a unique urban nature play space for use by its clients and the local neighborhood residents. Green Hearts assisted with the conceptual design of this project.

**Cincinnati Nature Center:** August marked the grand opening of the Marge and Charles Schott Nature PlayScape. Green Hearts assisted with the conceptual design of this project.

**Ansonia Nature Center, CT:** A January 2012 opening is scheduled for their new nature preschool. Green Hearts prepared the business plan for this venture.



*The large sand play pit at "The Big Backyard," SafeNet's nature play space in Erie, PA.*

## Publications

Green Hearts' 20-page booklet, *A Parents' Guide to Nature Play*, has been re-printed again — making a total of over 25,000 copies in print! It has been distributed throughout the United States as well as in Canada, New Zealand, and Brazil (in a Portuguese translation!). It can be downloaded for free from Green Hearts' website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org).

Bulk purchases of the *Parents' Guide* may be arranged by contacting Ken Finch at 402-344-8711, or [kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org). Shared branding of the booklet may also be arranged.

## More Nature Play Tips for Your Yard

A child's view of the world is much smaller and more intimate than that of adults, and this is a key factor in providing frequent nature play for your kids! They don't need spectacular vistas or miles of trails to explore and enjoy nature. Instead, they can be engaged for hours with tiny wonders they find right in your own yard, even in winter — like twigs, pine cones, animal tracks, or small "landscapes" like rock gardens and shrub hideaways.

Here are a few more simple ideas for "kidscaping" — part of our continuing series in this newsletter. (For past issues, visit the Green Hearts website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org)).

**Loose Parts:** These are materials that kids can play with over and over again, differently each time, in a free-form, creative way. Legos™ are a commercial example of loose parts, though an assortment of cardboard sheets, boxes, and tubes might be equally playful and much cheaper!



Outside, nature provides an endless supply of loose parts for play. Perhaps the best of these are sticks — great for building, digging, poking in puddles, whacking against tree trunks, drawing in the dirt, and imaginatively transforming into anything from a gun to a guitar. There's a good reason that "the stick" has been inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame!

Sticks are readily and freely available to most American children. However, nature's loose parts encompass many more options:

- pine cones
- leaves
- flowers
- bamboo poles
- log stumps
- mud
- cattails
- seeds and seed pods
- wood chips
- tree cookies
- rocks
- tall grasses

These can be ably complemented by items like tarps, sheets of wood or cardboard, scrap lumber, and a few basic hand tools. So keep a healthy supply of loose parts on hand, and watch your kids have a blast with them!

**Drama Deck:** Children love to pretend — whether through passive daydreaming or in more active and dramatic forms of play. Sometimes a group of neighborhood kids will spontaneously come together to create their own little play or musical production — a process that may stretch on for days. This kind of pretend play can and does happen inside, but there's something about the outdoors that seems to spark it even more!

You can support this creative process by building a simple wooden platform in your backyard, using two-by-four lumber and decking boards. This can sit right on a flat piece of ground, and it needn't be any larger than eight feet square — thus using standard-sized lumber.

The platform will quickly be recognized as a "stage" by your kids, giving them a place to focus their dramatic play that is akin to Carnegie Hall in their own minds! To make it even better, plant shrubs around the rear and sides of the deck, or tuck the platform into an existing shrub bed — creating a "backstage" area while highlighting the performance space.



### Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, you appreciate the work we're doing, and you would like to stay informed about it, please support us with an annual contribution! Every gift truly helps, no matter what size — and every one will be gratefully acknowledged.

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**Thank you!**

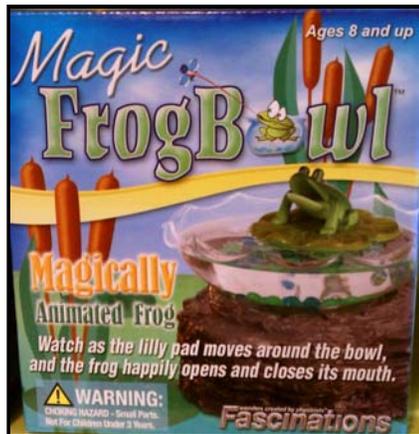
## A Vital Key to Great Nature Play: Authenticity

Authentic play experiences are becoming rarer for our children — that is, play with *real* objects, not digital simulations or plastic imitations. Sadly, *authentic nature* is not very accessible for many modern children, so artificial places for nature play must often be created. Thankfully, when well-designed and ecologically diverse, such nature play areas can offer wonderful discoveries, creative adventures, and lots of sensory stimulation — unlike some commercial products that only pretend to bring nature into children’s lives!

With this Magic Frog Bowl (available at a store near you!), your kids can watch passively as the frog “happily opens and closes its mouth.”

Or you can walk your children to the closest pond to hunt for real frogs, hear their calls, watch them jump and swim, and yes, even catch one!

*It’s your choice, parents.*



*Splashing up the artificial play stream at the new Marge and Charles Schott PlayScape at the Cincinnati Nature Center. Green Hearts is proud to have assisted with the conceptual design of this project.*

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Institute for Nature in Childhood

4502 South 42<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Omaha, NE 68107-1059

[www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org)

*Bringing Children and Nature Back Together*