



Reinforcing the Thin Green Line

Are New Approaches to Nature Play Forging Powerful Bonds with Nature?

by Ken Finch, President, Green Hearts INC

It is now widely recognized that spontaneous, nature-based play is no longer common in the United States. However, thousands of wise and passionate educators, conservationists, and parents are working to restore it to childhood – ironically, by devising structured ways to re-create this unstructured form of play.

Numerous approaches are being used: schoolyard habitats, family nature clubs, backyard “kidscaping,” nature-based preschools, designed nature playscapes, after-school initiatives, new youth group programming, and more. Much trial and error is going into the effort, which should eventually result in a set of experience-based best practices. For now, though, “re-constituted” nature play remains a work in progress.

Nowhere is this more apparent than amidst the wide variety of nature playscapes (a.k.a. natural play spaces, nature playgrounds, nature classrooms) that have been springing up across the country. Some of these let kids enjoy unstructured, free-will play in true natural areas. There you’ll see kids climbing real trees, looking under rocks in a shallow stream, catching bugs and butterflies, and digging in real dirt to find buried treasure – and beaming with delight when that treasure turns out to be a fat earthworm!

Yet in many other places nature play is now being packaged in the form of purpose-built “natural” play areas that comprise mostly human-made and non-living features. In these sites a child may first play on a low lumber platform (for theatrics), then enjoy a concrete water table (for floating toys), move on to a plastic log to crawl through, next visit an art-and-sorting table with pre-supplied specimens, thence go to a modest-sized sand box, and finish up by stepping through an attractive labyrinth or along a narrow path of “tree cookies.” These are all fine activities for young

children’s healthy growth and development, as well as for just plain fun! But where, pray tell, is any authentic experience with nature?

“Nature” and “Outdoor” Are Not Synonyms

The broad appeal of nature play has seen it happily embraced by multiple constituencies, including early childhood educators, conservationists, recreation designers, and parents. This extends the reach of this new/old form of play, but each proponent group tends to re-define nature play from its own perspective.

For example, the “nature play” practiced at many early childhood centers is essentially an outdoor form of what they routinely provide indoors: educational, store-bought, 100-percent-safe activity centers and play materials that are human-designed and lifeless. In the outdoor version of this paradigm, the synthetic “nature” activity areas are scattered separately across perfectly level grounds covered in soft surfaces. A handful of neatly arrayed shrubs and flowers may be included, but more for aesthetics than for their play value. And at the very luckiest sites there may also be a few mature trees – for shade, of course, not for climbing!

Here at Green Hearts, we have our perspective, too: that of naturalists and environmental educators. Green Hearts was very deliberately founded as a conservation

As children, we need time to wander, to be outside, to nibble on icicles, watch ants, to build with dirt and sticks in the hollow of the earth, to lie back and contemplate clouds....”

- Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood*

organization. Our primary intent is to promote and advance nature play as a powerful conservation strategy, fostering children’s love of nature as the emotional flashpoint for lifetimes of caring about and caring for our environment. We also recognize and celebrate all the great developmental benefits of nature-based play: cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual, creative, and social. But from our viewpoint, these are wonderful supplements to the best and highest value of nature play: its role in nurturing conservation values.

Our perspective drives a different view of nature play than that of some other groups. Radically enough, we believe that nature play should take place in real, true, living, authentic nature – in all its diversity, magic, messiness, beauty, instability, risk, challenge, and joy.

We assert that *nature play is not just outdoor play*; it is not simply throwing a Frisbee in the park, or installing a large musical instrument on a school playground. *True* nature play is much more than merely using the outdoors as a stage setting for forms of play that have no inherent focus on the natural world!

Play With Nature, Not Just In Nature

Hence our core belief: *Authentic nature play is playing with nature, not just in nature.* The more that nature play involves direct physical interaction with real nature – e.g., catching frogs, digging holes, poking in the pond with sticks, crawling under bushes, picking flowers – the more likely it is to spark a positive and enduring bond between child and nature.

Connecting Children to Nature: What Works Best?

This scale reflects Green Hearts’ beliefs about which forms of childhood activities are most powerful in creating lasting personal bonds with nature. Each rating is an arbitrary point on a continuous spectrum, and the examples given are representative, not exhaustive. Any of the activities from #1 up may forge enduring nature connections, but we believe that the higher-rated activities are more likely to do so.

“Nature play,” as used here, means unstructured, free-will play in and with nature.

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| <p>0 No nature connection. E.g., watching television, surfing the web, playing video or board games, reading books, playing sports — all without any nature involvement or theme.</p> <p>1 Passive indoor environmental learning. E.g., watching television, surfing the web, viewing displays, listening to lectures, reading — all with information about the natural world, but lacking direct, personal involvement with real nature.</p> <p>2 Incidental outdoor time in natural settings. Outside activities without a nature focus: e.g., dog walking, playing Frisbee, or bicycling, with no deliberate attention to the surroundings.</p> <p>3 Active indoor environmental learning. E.g., participatory natural science lessons using real specimens and artifacts, structured and led by adults in an indoor instructional setting.</p> <p>4 Personal nature-focused activities, indoors. E.g., crafting with natural materials, making natural history collections, window-view bird watching, raising caterpillars or tadpoles, or indoor gardening.</p> | <p>5 Active outdoor environmental learning. E.g., participatory natural science lessons that occur in a natural setting and involve interaction with real nature, but are structured and led by adults.</p> <p>6 Supervised nature play in artificial settings. E.g., occasional free play in designed, nature-themed play spaces that have mostly non-living and human-made features, with adult oversight and control.</p> <p>7 Personal nature-focused recreation, outdoors. E.g., purposeful attention to the natural surroundings while walking, fishing, kayaking, bird watching, resting, taking photographs, or sketching.</p> <p>8 Mentor-guided, nature-focused activities. E.g., hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, volunteering, or gardening with a special adult who is sharing his or her own love of nature.</p> <p>9 Supervised nature play in authentic settings. E.g., periodic free play and exploration in wild, diverse natural settings, with adult oversight and control.</p> <p>10 Frequent, child-directed nature play in authentic settings. E.g., child-initiated, child-regulated play and exploration in wild and diverse natural settings — repeatedly, and without adult oversight.</p> |
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Years of experience lie behind this belief, yet it is not much more than common sense. If we want children to really absorb something – i.e., to deeply integrate it into their values and understanding – then they need to be directly engaged with it, not just bystanders. We don't expect a child to become a great cook by playing board games at the kitchen table, do we? Or to become an All-American running back by sitting in the bleachers at lots of football games.... So if we want our kids to truly bond with nature, they have to actively engage with it.

This drives Green Hearts' thinking about nature play spaces. First and foremost, we believe they should be conceived as ecological communities that are chosen, planted, nurtured, and/or augmented for play – not just as nature-themed playgrounds installed with little if any reflection of the local environment, and which promote equally little interaction with authentic nature.

Artificial nature play spaces usually feature bought or built play equipment (even if natural in appearance and theme), with each piece set in its own defined space. Each area's intended type of play is pre-determined; some sites even use signs to specify this. There is nothing actually wrong with this approach; it does offer value for children. But it is more *outdoor* play than *nature* play – and thus is not likely to forge deep and lasting personal bonds with the natural world.



Wading into authentic nature play!

Spaces for *authentic nature play* should be drastically different. Essentially, they should ***be*** nature, or a very close approximation of it – with trees, shrubs, flowers, water, rocks, wildlife, soil and sand all flowing together in a tangled, unbroken, even unruly cacophony of delights and discoveries. In these natural spaces, kids find and relish their own play spots. They invent their own activities. They build with materials they gather themselves. They listen to the music of katydids and songbirds. They play in the dirt and get messy wherever they please. And throughout it all, they discover *real* nature as a wild, ever-changing, wonder-filled play partner.

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These wild play areas have more in common with tiny nature reserves and backyard wildlife habitats than with equipment-based playgrounds. Nature lovers may worry about damage to living organisms in these spaces, but they understand wild ecosystems as a boundless source of adventure and fun, and thus usually embrace wilder approaches to nature playscapes. In reality, kids' nature play almost never does harm on an ecological scale. Further, natural play features like boulders and logs usually bring less liability exposure and “duty of care” than do manufactured pieces of playground equipment – an important distinction in our litigious society.

Conversely, many early childhood professionals are queasy about wilder spaces for nature play. Sometimes they have legitimate concerns about licensing standards, but the greatest challenge may be how different it is from what they have long practiced: classrooms and playgrounds that emphasize structured and defined settings, planned activities, purchased play materials, and teachers' perceived need to direct the children's activities.

Fostering Authentic Nature Play

It takes no great genius to realize that the very best place for authentic nature play is in an authentically wild setting! Some conservation sites can offer this simply by dedicating part of their land to play. Yet even in existing natural areas, children's play can be valuably augmented with additional plantings or natural features endemic to the area, such as a butterfly garden, a pile of boulders, a few real logs, or a shallow pond. Creating a “density of diversity” is excellent for nature play – that is, a group of native microhabitats in close proximity to each other, offering kids a broad spectrum of joys and discoveries.

Of course, many facilities have no wild habitats for nature play, and thus may need to create a playscape out of bare ground. This is when the manufactured, “cookie cutter” approaches to nature play have understandable appeal; they are quick, easy, and pretty similar to buying any playground, with a little more landscape design and a few more plants included. But the ease of this approach is offset by its limited authenticity.

Creating wilder nature play spaces is more difficult. A fair dose of naturalist’s knowledge is needed to design playscapes that mimic and/or complement local habitats. Patience and care are necessary, too, as new plants and habitats need time to take root and thrive – and thus these spaces may be more fragile at first. Yet they get better and stronger every year as the plantings mature, multiply, and attract more and more mini-beasts – while purchased play equipment is usually static and inevitably degrades over time. Plus, wild play areas commonly cost less to create than their built counterparts.



*Bonding with a frog. Admittedly, it may be a one-way bonding!
(Photo thanks to Carmen Field.)*

Additionally, authentic nature play spaces can offer a degree of real ecological value, since their microhabitats benefit birds, insects, small mammals, and endless other life forms. In school settings, this real nature can support legitimate natural science lessons – a nice addition to the space’s inherent play value. The conservation benefits of wild play spaces are also a good reflection on the values of the host school, organization, or homeowner.

In actual practice, the design of natural play areas is rarely a black-and-white issue. Rather, it is a spectrum of options that stretch from preformed and plastic on one end, to authentic and awesome on the other. Various points on the spectrum can serve different purposes. An artificial, chosen-from-a-catalog nature classroom is less likely to help kids fall in love with the natural world, but it can still fuel their holistic development – thus making it effective for some constituencies.

However, rich and authentic nature play spaces can claim this same portfolio of developmental impacts *and* robustly foster life-long bonds with nature. So shouldn’t that duality be a central goal for *every* nature play space? Environmental organizations, especially, should embrace more authentic approaches to nature play, and should also promote it as a powerful and appealing conservation strategy that supports their mission. Yet even these groups needn’t be absolute purists in the design of nature playscapes. There is always room for fun components like a tree house, recycled “loose parts” for construction play, or extra tree stumps to hop on – so long as they don’t supplant the site’s *real* nature.

Nature Play as Social Change

Currently our country’s support for conservation is tenuous, at best. When sophisticated opinion polls gauge public priorities for a broad range of national issues, the environment does not fare well. Amidst that reality, a thin green line of concerned citizens and dedicated professionals stands as the primary safeguard against further environmental deterioration and the harm it will inflict on our grandchildren’s future.

Nature play has a vital role to fulfill in strengthening that thin line: nurturing the emotional foundations of conservation values in future generations of citizens. To best serve that purpose, Green Hearts ardently believes that high quality nature play spaces should chiefly entail rich, diverse natural habitats enhanced by other genuine natural features. In the best and most influential nature play spaces, any artificial components will only augment the site’s true, authentic nature – *never* serve as a substitute for it!



Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

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Which Examples Are Authentic Nature Play?



Balancing on a plastic log, or dissecting a real rotting log?



Digging in a tiny sand box, or digging to China?



An adult's idea of collecting and sorting, or a child's?



Climbing on perfectly flat, evenly stepped platforms, or climbing on a fallen tree?



Playing on a concrete water table, or playing in a real, living stream?



Building neatly and easily with kit materials, or building free-form with branches?

