

How kids can reconnect with nature on the playground

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An earlier generation of kids may have spent all their free time playing in the woods, but in today's world of helicopter parenting and stranger danger, letting their children do the same is unthinkable for many parents.

Now, park designers and officials as well as school boards are trying to reacquaint kids with nature, not by sending them into the forest, but by creating what are called natural playgrounds.

This week, the Toronto District School Board rejected a plan to sell off playground land to help pay for capital projects, reaffirming the importance of wide-open spaces to children's development.

The movement to swap swings, slides and monkey bars for boulders, grassy hills and trees is gaining ground across Canada, the United States and other countries. Advocates say natural playgrounds prompt much more imaginative free play, foster social interaction and cut down on bullying, and encourage the sort of risk-taking some experts say overcautious parenting has been unintentionally blocking.

Their emergence can be traced back to the 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, by journalist Richard Louv. He coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder," cautioning that cutting children off from nature was linked to rising rates of obesity, depression and attention deficit disorder.

With more people than ever now living in urban environments, there is a greater recognition of the importance of connecting kids with nature through play. In the United States, natural playgrounds have been created in Chicago, Boston, Portland, Seattle, Phoenix and New York in recent years.

The concept has reached such a critical mass that the Natural Wildlife Federation and the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University have partnered to create the Natural Play & Learning Area

Guidelines Project, to outline a road map for the design and management of natural play environments.

Natural playgrounds typically include five elements: rolling topography, boulders, logs, pathways and large trees and shrubs. The specifics are usually reflective of local surroundings: "This is the '100-mile diet' of playgrounds."

Traditional playgrounds decide for kids in advance how they will play: Swings are for swinging; slides are for sliding. But in a natural playground, it is not immediately clear how their elements should be incorporated, so it is up to kids to use their imaginations.

"That's the whole theory behind it," says Scott Belair, the lead instructor for the Canadian Playground Safety Institute.

Research has also shown that natural playgrounds alter the way children in them relate to one another.

"In a commercial playground, usually what ends up happening is that the most athletically gifted child ends up choosing the game and running the playground," Mr. Belair says. "With a naturalized playground, kids tend to play more co-operatively. ... There's a wider variety of play elements involved than just who can climb the fastest or the highest."

Studies have reinforced the idea that these environments reduce bullying, nurture collaborative skills and stimulate social interaction. Researchers at the University of Tennessee last year found that children more than doubled the time they spent playing in natural playgrounds compared with playgrounds with traditional wood and plastic materials.

"It's not because of regulations that playgrounds can be made boring. It's because there is a lack of creativity in their design," says Rich Dolesh, vice-president for conservation and parks for the U.S. National Recreation and Park Association.

The TDSB has been incorporating natural elements in its playgrounds since 2000, in part because of a recognition of how doing so can influence the way kids play.

“Often what was happening up till then was largely focused on boys and their need to run around and blow off steam,” says David Percival, the board’s senior manager of building design and renewal. By adding things such as stone sitting areas, playgrounds could better cater to kids, boys and girls alike, who were more likely to engage in passive play, which can be as simple as watching and listening to others.

“You tend to incorporate more kids in to the play experience in a naturalized playground than you do with a commercial playground,” Mr. Belair says.

Often, however, natural playgrounds are more difficult to maintain. Grassy hills can quickly turn to mud and dirt when they have to accommodate large numbers of kids.

While natural playgrounds are gaining in popularity, they should not replace traditional playgrounds altogether, Mr. Belair says. “There’s still a spot for commercial playgrounds. There’s a lot of kids that want that physical challenge.”

But other advocates say natural playgrounds are better on that level as well. “There is a thing nature provides for us that is called ‘graduated challenge’ that our current play structures are not doing a very good job of,” Mr. Bienenstock says. “Have you ever seen parents’ behaviour on one of these play structures? They are walking around with their hands out, following these kids from the ground, ready to catch them.”

By comparison, in a natural playground with boulders of different sizes and shapes, the kid big enough to be able to get to the top of the larger boulder is probably big enough to take the fall from it too.

Todd Catchpole, a parks manager at Five Rivers MetroParks in Ohio, which began developing natural play sites several years ago, believes that many of the injuries children suffer on traditional playground equipment are simply the result of boredom. “So what do they do? They try and go up the slide backward or jump off the top of the platform for the slide, using it in ways it wasn’t intended,” he says.

John Godfrey, headmaster of the Toronto French School, has been working to help “kids feel comfortable in a natural environment, so they have a sense

of balance or they know how far they climb or do whatever it is they are going to do," he says.

Ellen Sandseter, a professor of psychology in Norway and one of the world's leading experts on the importance of playground risk-taking, says a natural playground is "the most challenging environment. It has challenges for all children, all ages, all sizes," she says.

Consider the difference between swinging on monkey bars and climbing a tree, Prof. Sandseter says.

"The bars in climbing equipment have a certain centimetre distance between them and it's not really challenging. They could be blindfolded and climb it," she says. "But in a tree, there's different distances between branches. You have to feel the branches [to know if it will support you]. You have to constantly take a lot of risk decisions and evaluate your environment. ... It's no doubt nature environments are better in every way."

The project under way at the Toronto French School hopes to help students enjoy the quiet repose that only nature can provide, Mr. Godfrey says. But it should also let them test their boundaries, even if that means a few scrapes from a fall off a boulder or a tree branch, he adds.

"We're not doing any good by bubble-wrapping kids."