

Kids Tell Us What They Want

by Ron King, *Natural Playgrounds Company*

25 years ago, we interviewed 600 kids in one school. They ranged in age from Kindergarten through 4th grade, and every student in every class participated.

We presented a slide show in which we showed the kids 4 different scenarios, with 2 comparison photos for each, told them there was no right or wrong answer, and asked them a basic question.

Photo 1 was an 8' shade gazebo in the middle of a playground with kids sitting under it. The comparison photo was a stone wall circle in the woods. I asked the kids where they would rather be sitting and talking with their friends.

Photo 2 was a photo of an 8 year old leaning against a large tree in open woods. The comparison photo was a bunch of kids on a playground. I asked the kids where they would rather be.

Photo 3 was of 2 large playgrounds filled with brand-new equipment. The comparison photo was of woods by a lake with snow-capped mountains in the distance. (I always explained to the teachers that I knew that open water and snow capped mountains would not be found on any playground, but these photos were meant to inspire kids to think and imagine what it would be like to be in these various scenarios.) I asked the kids where they would rather be.

Photo 4 was of several playgrounds that had the large, fake boulders with different climbing things built into them. The comparison photo was a bunch of real boulders in the woods. I asked the kids where they would rather be climbing.

For every one of the comparisons, 100% of the kids chose the scenarios that were in natural settings.

At the end of the slideshow, I asked every age group to give me reasons why they preferred the more natural setting. I told him there was no right or wrong answer, but that I was just curious as to why they made the choice.

Below is the information compiled from the 600 children. Keep in mind that the kindergartners were every bit as vocal as all the other age children, and they all were saying the same kinds of things.

We were absolutely blown away by their responses.

Please keep in mind that all these thoughts were inspired by pictures only! Kids weren't in these natural settings, and some of them had never been to those kinds of natural settings, feeling the breezes and the coolness, smelling the smells, hearing the birds.... They were just looking at photos!!!

And obviously, they were comparing the pictures to their actual experiences on playgrounds.

There is no getting around the visceral reactions the kids were having, and there's no getting around the fact that they preferred being surrounded by nature. In the last 25 years, we've interviewed over 6,000 students, and they've all given us the exact same responses!!

This is why it is so absolutely critical to bring nature to schools.

Below are their responses compiled under headings that allowed us to group them.

Some of the responses are just beautiful.

So — **Why did you prefer the more natural setting?**

Just because it's natural

- A lot of green
- Beautiful smells
- Because it is woods
- Could be Grassy
- It's gorgeous
- I can Listen to nature
- I like nature
- I Like trees
- It grows
- It's where you belong
- Leaves moving in wind
- Like being in nature
- Lots of/more clean oxygen
- More natural
- More nature/trees
- Natural and more realistic
- Natural environment
- Open space

- People like nature
- Shade/echoes
- Shady and pretty
- More to smell

It's very peaceful

- Feels like you're away from it all
- Great place to talk
- Hear the leaves crackling
- It is relaxing.
- More calm and quiet
- More privacy
- More privacy/by myself
- More quiet, less crowded
- Not crowded
- Peace and quiet
- Peaceful
- Peaceful/by yourself
- Place to sit down-quiet
- Quiet More private
- Quiet/more time to think
- Quieter
- Quieter place
- Relaxing
- Time by yourself

I can play with nature

- Climbing trees
- Get dirty
- Good place to raft
- Hide behind trees
- Jump in the water
- Jumping
- Leaves on the ground-jump in
- Nice to hide under a tree
- Places to play hide and seek
- Play in water

It's more shady and cool

- Because it is damp and gives a lot of shade.
- Cool
- Cool/shade
- Cooler
- Cooler in the woods
- Cooler/shade
- More restful
- More shade
- Not so hot/comfortable
- Shadier
- There is a chance for a breeze

There's more of a chance to see wildlife

- Animals
- Birds chirping/hear and see wildlife
- Catch wildlife/frogs
- Find more caterpillars/discover
- Find wildlife
- Hear birds
- Hear birds chirping
- I Like animals
- Listening to birds
- More bugs
- More wildlife
- Salamanders/water life
- See frogs/wildlife/bugs
- See wildlife
- Watch birds
- Watch wildlife
- You can look for wildlife

There are more things to do

- Build things

- Climb more
- Climb on things
- Climb up the trees
- There is a combination of activities
- Might find water
- Can dig out rocks
- Enough room to explore/discover
- Find a hole & discover things
- Find more cool stuff*
- Follow the leader
- Lot of different activities
- More choices
- more choices in woods
- More climbing opportunities
- More places to walk
- More trees to climb
- Pretend Campfires
- See nice things
- Skipping rocks in water
- You can make forts

You can see a bunch of stuff

Natural places are more fun

- Different from classroom
- Different from what we're used to
- It's new and different
- Things keep changing
- Something different all the time
- You can use your imagination
- You can discover things
- More adventurous
- More freedom
- More loose parts
- More opportunities
- More options for new things
- Not same playground every day

- Opportunity for new things/creativity
- Berry picking
- Build things
- Can Study nature
- Can climb trees & things
- Could have a river
- Different smells
- Do different things
- Find caterpillars
- Grow food
- Jumping
- Possibility of water

They're more exciting

- Can make a pile of leaves and jump in them
- Fun to play in woods
- Can run in circles
- You can jump
- You could play hide and go seek/ hide behind trees

There are many different opportunities

- Not boring
- More adventurous
- Can Run around more
- Discovery
- Exploring in the woods
- Find cool stuff
- More things to do/you never know what is coming next/surprises
- It always seems like they're more things to do
- Play adventure games and explore/discover
- Seasonal changes

It seems like there's more room

- Endless
- Free
- More room
- More space to do things
- Outside feels bigger
- Running space
- We like big

Compared to Playgrounds?

- Playgrounds are boring
- Equipment needs maintenance
- Plastic gets too hot
- Plastic can burn your hands

- Woods are quiet; Playgrounds are noisy.
- Nothing in nature is hand made; it's calming
- Not high tech/more fun
- Uses nature not man-made stuff
- Everything put together in playground Woods are not the same all the time
- Nature feels bigger
- The playground stuff is babyish
- I don't like climbing on plastic
- Playground has hard benches
- Slides heat up from the sun
- The woods don't break

Kids clearly want to be in natural settings, and they clearly appreciate all the play and learning opportunities nature offers, so when you're thinking about giving them a new outdoor play environment at their school, or in their backyard, give them what they clearly want.

Give them a Natural Playground!