

Natural Playground Aims To "Leave No Child Inside"

By [Beth Potier](#), UNH Media Relations
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Credit: Ron King, Natural Playgrounds Company

In a ship behind the UNH Child Study and Development Center, young fishermen cast their lines while sharks circle menacingly below. Nearby on the playground, trolls lurk under a bridge barking threats to any billy goats – or preschoolers -- who cross above.

Of course, there are no sharks, trolls or billy goats endangering the children at the Child Study and Development Center (CSDC). For that matter, there's no ship on the playground either, nor are there traditional swings, seesaws,

or climbing structures. Instead, the CSDC's recently completed natural playground boasts paths, hills, blueberry bushes, garden plots, and a variety of structures made from UNH-harvested wood that suggest a stage, a treehouse, and a clubhouse – or a boat, plane, or troll-hiding bridge.

The CSDC's new natural playground, the first of its type in the state, was designed by Concord-based Natural Playgrounds Company, which worked in close collaboration with CSDC teachers, parents, and children to create a space that would reintroduce children to the joys and creative possibilities of the natural world. Natural playgrounds combine landscape elements, pathways, weather and sun patterns, plant groupings, and other natural materials and structures to create miniature landscapes that aim to foster play and learning opportunities.

The CSDC officially opens its natural playground Tuesday, Oct. 14, at 9:30 a.m. New Hampshire first lady Dr. Susan Lynch, a pediatrician and advocate for children's fitness and health, will speak and join UNH educators and administrators, including President Mark Huddleston, and CSDC teachers, children and parents for the celebration.

"The natural playground emphasizes a sense of discovery, a sense of change," says CSDC executive director John Nimmo, who is also an associate professor of family studies at UNH. "The natural world is always throwing you curve balls, and that facilitates exploration and learning."

The CSDC's 5,000 square-foot playspace incorporates elements that encourage children's physical exploration and motor skills, including a small climbing wall, a ladder-like "lookout tower," a slide, and a low balance beam, which Nimmo notes is largely ignored in favor of a more challenging (and more natural) line of boulders. Sensory garden beds beg to be touched, smelled, looked at, tasted, and even listened to; they also encourage nurturing behavior like watering and weeding. A giant sandbox blends, beach-like, onto a cobblestone plaza from which a sprinkler can emerge on warm days, cooling children and providing the perfect sand-to-water ratio for optimal castle construction.

The natural playground responds to a growing body of research that points to benefits, ranging from lower stress levels to better health and nutrition outcomes, children derive from interacting with nature. The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed the No Child Left Inside Act, and in New Hampshire, Susan Lynch chaired a Leave No Child Inside forum in November 2007. "This is not just about having wood structures instead of metal or

plastic structures," says Nimmo. "There's a more exploratory attitude with this playground. Children are discovering worms, plants, and mud here." Sara West, a CSDC teacher, has observed the playground's impact on the way children play, too. "The children are more in charge of the story line of their dramatic play, rather than the equipment dictating what it should be," she says, recalling the treehouse that became a ship above shark-infested waters.

"Playground design that combines challenges, open-ended activities and a connection to nature enables children to engage in more constructive and elaborate play which is the cornerstone of a high quality early childhood program," says CSDC manager Laurie Conrad. "As a lab school, I believe we have a duty to demonstrate not only best practices, but innovative ways to foster the joy and wonder that comes with having children spend more time with nature." The CSDC encourages educators and UNH students to contact the center (603-862-2835) for a tour of the new playground.

Total cost of the natural playground was \$67,000, much of which was donated. Funding for the project came from the UNH Parents' Association, the UNH Foundation, the College of Health and Human Services, Harding Metals, the UNH Sawmill, the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund, and Chi Phi Alpha fraternity.

The Child Study and Development Center will celebrate 80 years of early childhood education at UNH in January 2009. The center is known nationally for its inquiry-based approach to early education and its award-winning Growing a Green Generation Project on gardening with children. As a laboratory school, the CSDC provides a setting for research, educates 100 pre-service teachers, and hosts hundreds of educator tours each year. Learn more at www.csdc.unh.edu.