

Affordable, Natural Playgrounds

by Ron King, President
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With the world of play dominated by manufactured playgrounds, it may be hard to understand the importance of going in a different direction, but there is good reason to change course and explore a much more viable playground option.

Montessori and other schools can save lots of money by creating sustainable, philosophically consistent, natural playgrounds that are safer and meet green standards, yet challenge kids emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Over the past six decades, playground equipment manufacturers have been the sole source for answers to questions about play, children, and safety. When a new playground was needed, or one needed refurbishing, decision-makers always turned to these companies to give them the most up-to-date playground equipment that met the newest ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials, International) and CPSC (US Consumer Product Safety Council) safety standards.

But the injury statistics suggest that this confidence may be misplaced. Despite the stringent safety regulations, over a half million playground equipment related accidents are reported every year.

In 2006, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons reported that most of these injuries occurred among people younger than 20. More than 177,000 injuries came from monkey bars or other climbing equipment, nearly 128,000 from swings, more than 113,000 from slides, and thousands more from other playground equipment.

The estimated cost for these injuries? \$12.8 billion in medical, legal and liability, pain and suffering, and work-loss expenses.

But the costs don't stop there. About every 10 years, when the equipment becomes outdated, out-of-code, or out-of-compliance, it has to be replaced, so it's dumped in the landfill and replaced without a thought, sometimes at great sacrifice to other, more pressing program needs.

But casting this equipment in the dump is also at great cost to the environment, because the carbon footprint (the total carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases emitted during production, shipping, use, and the frequent trashing of out-of-compliance playground equipment) is ominously high.

Put all this up against the fact that the initial cost of equipment is also very high, especially in relation to its play value (the kind and amount of play per child, per dollar),

and the fact that with the uncertain price of oil, prices for play components with a petrochemical-based will continue to soar even more, equipment-based playgrounds are very expensive, indeed.

Luckily, there is another, very viable, less costly, and much more environmentally friendly playground option.

We work with Head Start Programs, Montessori and Waldorf schools, public schools, childcare centers, developers, and communities all around the country, so we have plenty of opportunity to ask students, teachers, and parents about issues on their playgrounds.

Without question, the one issue that is constant: children are easily bored trying to play on equipment that is not challenging, and that offers nothing new day after day, month after month, year after year.

During our interactive, Keynote presentation to parents and teachers, there is a point where we ask each person to share their most vivid memories of fun things they did when they were children. The list is endless; it includes building forts, climbing trees, walking in the woods, playing in the water, looking for bugs, digging in the sand, making mud pies, climbing rocks, and so on.

The fascinating thing is, that when we ask today's children (your children!) to share their most fun, outdoor experiences, they say the *exact same things!* (To be fair, we do have to tell them that organized sports, shopping at the mall, playing with computerized games and toys, and riding motorized machines are not outdoor play activities and are therefore off the table.) Playing in the dirt, making forts, splashing in the water, climbing rocks, running through the tall grass, and just being quiet are but a few of their favorite things.

So an obvious question is: if adults loved (and remembered years later!) doing these kind of outdoor activities when they were young, and their children today like the very same activities, why do we give our children expensive and boring plastic and metal playgrounds surrounded by a sea of woodchips that they clearly don't like and don't want?

The fact that children like being outdoors and connected with nature in very fundamental ways is good news, indeed, because there is now an overwhelming body of research showing direct links between exposure to nature and the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of children. Children are sick less often when exposed to nature (which lessens the overall costs to families associated with children being sick), they do better in school, and they're calmer. Children with attention difficulties find nature very therapeutic; it helps them focus and concentrate.

This is the impetus behind natural playgrounds.

“Natural playgrounds,” says Wikipedia, “are play environments that blend natural materials, features, and indigenous vegetation with creative landforms to create purposely complex interplays of natural, environmental objects in ways that challenge and fascinate children and teach them about the wonders and intricacies of the natural world while they play within it.

“Play components may include earth sculptures, log balance mazes, split boulder gardens, caves, embankment slides, earth houses, rock scrambles, tree climbers, natural fences, and textured pathways.”

To sum it up:

- Natural playgrounds are designed to expose children to the beauty and wonder of nature while challenging them physically and mentally.
- Natural playgrounds are sustainable because they use natural resources in their basic form, and do not require components that are not easily replaced by nature.
- Natural playgrounds have a low carbon footprint, as materials used for them are not manufactured and are generally available locally.
- Natural Playgrounds provide 10 times more play items with very high play value. For example, a 22,000 square foot Natural Playground efficiently utilizing all of its square footage cost \$90,000 for 430 high play value elements, while a single piece of equipment on only 2200 square feet (90% less area) costs \$115,000 and only has 43 play elements, all of which have very low play value.

Bottom line for Montessori and facilities? Natural playgrounds are a cost-effective and philosophically consistent approach to outdoor play and learning that result in better, more healthy students, higher test scores, more beautiful surroundings, and a healthier, greener environment.

Ron King is the president of the Natural Playgrounds Company headquartered in Concord, NH. The Natural Playgrounds design and construction companies work all over the US. They can be reached through the web at www.naturalplaygrounds.com, by email at info@naturalplaygrounds.com, or by toll free phone 888-290-8405. Their new store offers numerous and unusual natural playground elements.

Sidebar #1

Side benefits of a lower tech, Natural Playground

- inexpensive solutions to drainage issues
- increased wildlife habitats
- indigenous landscaping
- greening of school grounds
- beautification of the property and the neighborhood
- age appropriate play
- safer play
- more, fun options for children of all ages

- timelessness
- Leeds certification
- higher enrollment and longer waiting lists
- philosophically consistent with all approaches to early childhood education

Sidebar #2

For the same price as equipment-based playgrounds, natural playgrounds

- have 3 times more play items
- are significantly higher in play value
- have low carbon footprints
- use 100% (as compared to 10%) of the available land area (which means more children can play and interact)
- are totally sustainable, and
- offer all the health benefits of nature.