

The Innocence of Natural Play: Creating Unstructured Play Environments

By Ron King

We're wired to play and have fun, aren't we?

I've seen movies of bears wrestling with each other, monkeys playing and laughing together, squirrels chasing each other in trees, and cats batting dangling string, rolling and chasing balls, and pouncing on wind-up mice.

And us? Don't we do the same kinds of things, and sometimes go to great lengths to take a break from routines and have fun?

All of us are busy, but we do look for moments here and there to grab a coffee, see a movie, go out for dinner, take a drive, chat with a friend, or watch TV.

And boy, does it feel luxurious when we actually have time to unwind and hike, or fish, or garden, or swim, or paint, or read, or pursue our hobby...or just take a long, wonderful, quiet nap in the middle of the day. Anything that doesn't involve a schedule or an obligation or meeting a deadline is just plain precious to us.

Unstructured, unscheduled, free time. There is absolutely nothing like it.

But our lives are so full of family and work obligations, that finding that kind of time for ourselves is really difficult and, for me (and you, too, perhaps), it almost becomes an obsession.

What happened to the days of our youths when all we ever thought about was play? Maybe it's too long in the past to be certain, but when I was eight, I remember endless days. Hours and hours playing trucks and cars in my friend's dirt driveway, playing in the hilly field by my house, playing with wooden bricks my dad made from a 2x4, climbing trees, and making forts and tree houses in the woods.

Hours! And you probably did similar things, too!

Some time ago, we developed an interactive presentation about Natural Playgrounds, and one of our exercises asks people to tell us about the favorite things they did outside when they were 8 or 10 years old.

The answers are fun: climbing trees, making forts, making mud pies, climbing rocks, digging in the sand, running through tall grass, looking for bugs, playing in the water, walking in the woods, jumping in leaves, making sand castles, making snow angels....

As people remember how much fun they had, the excitement grows, and pretty soon everyone is laughing, and sharing even tiny details about their childhood endeavors. They bubble with enthusiasm and excitement and don't want to stop talking! Incredible! These are things they did 30 and 40 years ago, and they remember them like they were yesterday! I bet if I told them they could run outside right then and there and do the same things, they'd be gone in a second!

Wow!

So here's the importance of these memories: all of the play activities, every single one of them, was unstructured. As kids, these adults made up their own rules, their own actions, made discoveries, learned how to do things on their own, took risks, solved problems, got satisfaction, laughed, had fun, felt successful -- all because they were left on their own to play in an environment that encouraged imagination and exploration.

Unstructured, free play. That's what made the memories indelible.

Contrast that with play experienced by most children today. Inside a fenced playground usually filled with woodchips and nothing different or exciting day after day, they find themselves bored. There's no place to explore, no discoveries to make, no imagination required, no risks to take, no nature to watch...everything's the same, same, same every time they come on the playground.

But that's not all. Over the past 40 years, there's been a 50% drop in unstructured outdoor activities, structured sports have doubled, homework has more than tripled, kids spend more than 30 hours a week with electronic entertainment, recess has been reduced or eliminated in 40% of US elementary schools (some schools are even being built without playgrounds), and parents continue to fully book their children's free time with organized activities like sports, swimming, archery, computer camps, choir practice, and dance lessons.

Everything, it seems, is conspiring to keep children from the unstructured, play-filled Montessori approach where children follow their own interests and not a set curriculum.

What's a Montessori school to do?

Well, keep this in mind. Before the age of five, children in the US spend an average of 12,500 hours in childcare outside the home. That's a lot of time, and to put it in perspective, this is the same amount of time that a child spends in school between the first grade and the 12th grade.

That's a lot of time.

For those Montessori schools who also have lower and upper elementary students, a child may be under your care for 25,000 hours! If a student spends an hour and a half a

day (20% of that 25,000 hours) outside at your school, you have the possibility of putting them in touch with nature for 5,000 hours.

5,000 hours! That's a minimum of 625 consecutive school days where they could be outside every day for eight hours. Almost 2 years!

That's a lot of time.

And that gives you a phenomenal opportunity to help your students be completely immersed in nature in an unstructured, Montessori way, and to tailor their education around their natural tendency to be extraordinarily curious and physical.

Kellert* thinks that direct encounters with nature in childhood may be critical for healthy human development in the affective, cognitive, and evaluative domains. Pyle* thinks that children who grow up experiencing the richness of their local, natural environments become adults who value global biodiversity. Healy* thinks that children's spontaneous, self-generated play has tremendous potential to actually enhance brain development and increase kids' intelligence and academic ability.

(more Citations)????????

Decades of research show that unstructured play is a crucial foundation for developing creativity, intellect, and emotional and social skills, so it's clear that your first priority should be to create an outdoor environment where children can exercise their curiosity and manipulate their environment. Outdoor play in nature helps link sensory-motor, cognitive, and social-emotional experiences, and provides an ideal setting for brain development.

Children need the same opportunity for unstructured play you had when you were a child so that they, too, can create the same memories you have all these years later.

Creating the opportunity

The essential dimensions of play, says Montessori, foster activities that are voluntary, enjoyable, purposeful and spontaneous, help expand creativity using problem solving, social, language, and physical skills, expand on new ideas, and help the child to adapt socially.

These are the very building blocks around which Natural Playgrounds are built, so it seems appropriate to provide simple guidelines for creating more natural play experiences at your school.

The very first action should be to begin talking about the attributes of natural play and Natural Playgrounds with your staff, teachers, licensors, insurance representatives, and parents. Over the last 10 years, the movement toward natural play has been growing

and there is significant research available (check out the Children in Nature Network). Making Richard Louv's book, "Last Child in the Woods" available to your staff would be very helpful (http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com/npc_cart/index.php?productID=720).

The more discussions you have with your staff and your parents, the easier the transition will be.

The next step is to begin introducing numerous, natural loose parts into your playground, such as tree cookies, tree stumps, saplings, logs, wooden bricks (made from 2x4s, 2x6s, 6x6s, etc.), rough cut lumber, a huge pile of sand, a hand pump or other source of running water (preferably near the sand), a huge pile of dirt, a huge pile of mulch, and so on. And don't scrimp. Get 25 tree cookies, 100 saplings of various sizes, a mountain of wooden bricks...

All of this may look very messy, but just bring these items onto the playground and watch what happens!

The next step will be difficult, especially if it's new, but try removing all metal, plastic, or wooden equipment. Over 5000 children we've interviewed told us they find equipment boring and that they'd rather play with natural items, so get rid of the equipment (and the woodchips surrounding it). The children don't want it, and they won't need it after you've given them all those natural loose parts with which to play, imagine, experiment, explore, and discover.

You may experience resistance from parents who don't understand what you're trying to do, but if you preceded your transition by raising their awareness about Natural Playgrounds, their resistance will be easy to overcome.

From this point on, you have several options. Texturing the landscape, planting shrubs and trees, creating sensory, vegetable, and flower gardens, making caves, creating streams using rainwater runoff, building climbing walls into hills, making tunnels and bridges, creating rock scrambles, building labyrinths, installing living willow tunnels and domes, making sapling arbors, fences, and furniture, installing musical fences and pedestal pipes, and so on.

If you want to be organized about your activities, you may want to get help creating a master plan which incorporates all of your Natural Playground dreams while optimizing use of your outdoor space. That way, as you raise money and the level of commitment to natural play, you can phase construction in an organized way over a period of years.

The bottom line is, that unstructured, outdoor play and exposure to nature is a critical part of the Montessori education, so your outdoor environment should be designed to encourage and enhance these very activities.

Citations

Pyle, R (2002) Eden in a vacant lot: special places, species, and kids in the neighborhood of life.

Kellert, S (2002). Experiencing nature: affective, cognitive, and evaluative development in children

Healy, J (1990) "Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It."

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