

The Wonderful Potential of Natural Playgrounds

by Ron King, President

Natural Playground's company

We never realized that working with a Head Start facility 10 years ago would change the course of our business.

We had been designing Natural Playgrounds for several years, exploring the potential for discovery oriented, creative play on a completely natural theme, and were being welcomed by childcare facilities around the country because we were offering a more philosophically consistent approach to outdoor play.

But when we walked into this New York Head Start facility, something prompted us to wonder out loud how teachers knew, out of all of the millions of possibilities, what was important to teach their children.

“Here’s how we organize our topics,” and without a pause, the Director pulled out a list of 40 thematic units.

It wasn’t until after we left the facility that we had time to look carefully at the list. We were trying to figure out how to incorporate the idea of a learning environment in the design of Natural Playgrounds, and after looking over the list we were struck by the numbers of things that could be more easily taught outside than inside.

So the first thing was to pull out all the units having to do with the outdoors. Here’s that list:

- Animal Studies
- Apples
- Bears
- Birds
- Clocks/Telling Time (SunTime)
- Dinosaur
- Endangered Species
- Explorers
- Farm
- Map Skills

- Measurement
- Native American
- Oceans
- Penguins
- Rocks & Minerals
- Snow
- Spiders
- Water
- Weather
- Wild Animals
- Whales

I still have a hard time figuring out how teachers get children to really understand snow in the abstract inside a classroom. Same with oceans, or farms, or exploring, or about birds and bears, and apples and spiders.

Wouldn't it be a lot easier for children to understand how apples grow by actually going to an orchard and seeing the bees pollinating the blossoms, or in the fall picking an apple off a tree?

Wouldn't it be a whole lot easier to understand spiders by discovering a web spun between two flower stalks and watching a spider catching insects? Or understand the weather by actually being outside witnessing the wind and watching the clouds roll by?

I couldn't understand how you can really teach about water without seeing it in its natural setting. How would you understand that a rivulet is creating its meandering path only in response to gravity's pull and the softness of the materials around it? Or how would you understand time without seeing a shadow move in response to the earth changing its position with the sun?

If we could just create various outdoor settings that provided opportunities where these units could be more easily taught, wouldn't it make a teacher's job easier?

We approached teachers with this idea, and they were excited.

The possibility of taking the next six thematic units outside was, at the time, somewhat questionable. Since then, however, several Head Start and other childcare facilities, Montessori schools, and elementary and middle schools have asked us to incorporate design features and elements in their Natural Playground designs that would make teaching these units much more easy.

- Division Skills
- Electricity
- Fraction Attractions
- Multiplication Skills
- Planets and Space
- Simple Machines

Once our staff started thinking about it, it was really easy to incorporate simple machines, for instance, as play features. On one 2 acre playground behind an elementary school was a huge boulder mostly buried in the ground, but that became the sun, and at the appropriately scaled distance away, we placed smaller boulder and rock planets in their proper positions.

The last 13 units, which included communities, fables, folk tales, government studies, inventions, optical illusions, the Oregon Trail and the 50 states (although the large-scale maps that can be walked on are great for this), and so on are probably more easily taught inside where other kinds of resources are available. Still, discussing communities outdoors in a neighborhood makes a lot of sense, or telling folk tales in an outdoor amphitheater would be a whole lot more fun.

So now, as a matter of course in our slideshow, we talk about the possibility of incorporating these same kinds of thematic units in Natural Playground designs. Our hope is that we can encourage teachers to begin thinking about using the outdoors as a teaching resource.

But unfortunately, it's way too easy to stay inside. After all, as Richard Louv quotes a child in his book "Last Child in the Woods," all the electrical outlets are inside, and there is a place for everything. Shelves for books, cabinets for supplies and resources, desks where things can be easily put out of sight, the reading corner with a soft, clean carpet, and a comfortable chair for the teacher wanting to get off her feet.

We love going into classrooms. Teachers do a phenomenal job of making their classrooms vibrant learning spaces, and they spend lots of time organizing things just so to make their teaching easier and learning quicker. Things are hanging from the ceiling and popping out from the walls, the windowsills are covered with plants, and there's an aquarium sitting on a cabinet. It's almost too much stimulus.

Then tomorrow or next month or next year, the teacher reorganizes the entire classroom because they've learned what works better, what makes their days easier, and what helps the children learn even more.

Classrooms really are works of art.

But then we step outside, usually to a playground full of wood chips, faded plastic equipment, some of it lying on its side, and tired old play features that got boring to the kids long time ago, and we wonder why teachers haven't seen the potential of their outside space to make both learning and play a lot easier and a whole lot more fun.

I think the answer is that the outdoors is very complicated and confusing. There are licensing and safety guidelines to worry about, supervision issues, path systems that don't work, spatial relationships that are overwhelming, accessibility issues, and questions about sustainability. Neighbor concerns, unpredictable weather, sight lines, sun exposure, maintenance, ticks and mosquitoes, noise from nearby traffic, special-needs concerns, parents concerned about children getting dirty, and so on. Then of course there is the need to provide age-appropriate activities, and separate play areas for different age groups.

It's just way too much to think about and way too many things over which teachers have no control. So the easiest response is to just let happen whatever happens.

Parents donate old play items, and the director feels obligated to take it and add it to the pile of other things that mean nothing and whose play value is close to zero. Stuff gets worn out, but there really is no incentive to replace it with the same old stuff. Wood chips cover more and more of the playground, and shade is totally nonexistent.

And finally, in desperation, the Director or the Board decides it's time to do something, and turning to a catalog of playground equipment is easy, so the cycle starts all over again.

All in all, most of the outdoor spaces are pretty depressing.

But if somehow we can turn this around and teachers can begin recognizing that nature is really the ultimate teacher, and that almost everything they want for their children can be more easily accomplished outside in the right setting, then we might see a major shift in the design and implementation of playgrounds, and Natural Playgrounds may play a much bigger role in a child's education.

We recently finished a Natural Playground design for a large Head Start facility on a native American reservation in South Dakota. The chief of the tribe had declared a state of emergency for both the Native American language and customs and traditions, and wanted the playground for about 150 children to address the problem.

After speaking at great length to the head start staff (who also completed our very comprehensive questionnaire), talking to village elders, and conducting extensive research, we designed a Natural Playground that accurately reflects historic Native American life, customs, traditions, legends, and spirits.

Medicine wheels, earth houses, sweat houses, tipis, drying racks, Eagle staffs, marshes and lakes, dugout canoes, mountains, rivers and grassy plains (in miniature), statues of grazing buffalo, powwow circle, fire circles, gardens and watch towers, sacred entrances, ceremonial circles, log shinnies, cliffs, winter counts, 12 core values flags in Tate's Valley (Chief of the Winds), and a symbols station are a few of the significant features in this exciting, discovery oriented, natural learning and play environment -- all of which are scaled to young children.

Specially designed signs throughout use Native American words to identify natural and built features.

10 years ago we thought that incorporating thematic units in our Natural Playground designs was an exciting concept, but now we're designing Natural Playgrounds whose very essence reflects a culture and teaches an almost forgotten language.

The possibilities for Natural Playgrounds to be totally involving, outdoor classrooms are endless; our hope is that the community at large embraces the wonderful potential for nature to play a prominent role in the education of young children.

The Natural Playgrounds Company, headquartered in Concord, NH, designs and builds Natural Playgrounds throughout the US. The company 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.