

Nature Play in your own Backyard

What is it?

Natural play spaces can be small and inexpensive: a pile of dirt, leaves and sticks, climbing rocks, a small pathway to a fort of logs and sticks that can be built and rebuilt on a whim. A backyard composed of natural materials creates fun play opportunities for children.



Why do it?

Research has shown that play in nature promotes positive development in children. Nature play allows children to problem solve, discover, interact with others and gain trust in their own abilities. Children love to climb, dig in dirt, hide under tree branches, create forts, cross streams, jump in leaf piles, eat food they have harvested and touch living things. Not only do these environments help to develop dexterity and physical, cognitive and emotional strength in children, they also foster a love of nature. Children who directly experience the joys of nature become the future stewards of our world.



Photo credit: Helen Adams

How to get started

Visit an existing nature play space to get a feel for how they use objects from nature and kids' interest in manipulating them to create an engaging, fun and safe environment. Observe your child playing in an unstructured natural setting (creek bed, woods, meadow) and take note of what captures his or her imagination and interest. As you start to imagine how to create nature play spaces in your yard, brainstorm where you might be able to find materials you need for free. People are often looking to pass on logs, rocks and other materials that make great natural play things.

Local Resources

- Playscapes open to the public: The Marge & Charles Schott Nature PlayScape at the Cincinnati Nature Center in Milford, the University of Cincinnati Arlitt Child and Family Research and Education Center Playscape on UC's Clifton campus, Cincinnati Early Learning Center's Playscape in Walnut Hills, a collaboration with the Civic Garden Center and Adventurous Child.
- Local designers of playscapes, both for residential and institutional settings: Rachel Robinson Design Landscape Architecture LLC (513.236.2241), Luke Schelly Design Build (513.235.6172), GroundWork Design Collaborative Cincinnati (513.530.0949).
- Leave No Child Inside, Greater Cincinnati: www.Incigc.org



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Potential Elements of a Natural Play Space

- **Loose Parts:** A collection of sticks, rocks, leaves, tree trunk wedges, gravel, garden and cooking tools and more allows children to manipulate materials, which helps develop small and large motor skills while promoting creative play.
- **Dirt Pit:** A place to dig allows children to feel textures, find critters and learn about planting the food they harvest.
- **Raised Vegetable Beds:** Size garden beds to the child's scale so that growing is within reach. Kids can sow seeds, water, weed, harvest and cook from their work in the garden.
- **Vegetable Trellis or Teepee:** Children enter a space draped with vines, which changes throughout the season. They can look at, touch, smell and taste the plants and observe insects, shade and light from within their sheltered space.
- **Forts, Teepees, Playhouses:** Children love to work together to build and then hide in enclosed spaces where they can play, socialize, dream and imagine.
- **Platforms:** Surfaces of varying heights create spaces for sitting, drama, jumping and climbing.
- **Bird Blind:** Children peek through small holes and make observations without being seen. They may see birds, butterflies and other wildlife.
- **Fences:** There are many ways to enclose a space. Such enclosure allows parents to know their children are safe within the confines of a boundary and gives children freedom to wander.
- **Pathways:** Paths are the spine of the play space, allowing children unstructured opportunities to explore while leading them to destination points.
- **Plants:** Plantings create enclosure, focal points, niches, textural interest and fragrance. They create a beautiful environment surrounding active nature play.



Recommended Reading

- Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood: www.greenheartsinc.org
- Children and Nature Network: www.childrenandnature.org
- *Place-Based Education* by David Sobel
- *Imagine Childhood: Exploring the World through Nature, Imagination, and Play* by Sarah Olmsted

