



National Guidelines

Nature Play & Learning Places

Creating and managing places where children engage with nature

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Nature Play & Learning Places: Creating and managing places where children engage with nature, offers a set of guidelines for those who create, manage or promote development of nature spaces in the everyday environments of children, youth, and families, especially in urban/suburban communities. The goal is to attract kids and families outdoors to interact directly with nature.

Children must spend more time outdoors—for their good health and the health of our planet. If children don't move enough, their bodies will not develop in a healthy manner. If children don't grow up engaged with nature, chances are they will never understand human dependency on the natural world.

Nature play is defined as a learning process, engaging children in working together, to develop physical skills, to exercise their imaginations, to stimulate poetic expression, to begin to understand the workings of the world around them.

The guidelines focus on design and management of physical settings that facilitate direct, hands-on engagement with nature in the everyday lives of children and families. As defined by the national steering committee, a nature play and learning place is:

A designated, managed area in an existing or modified outdoor environment where children of all ages and abilities play and learn by engaging with and manipulating diverse natural elements, materials, organisms, and habitats, through sensory, fine motor and gross motor experiences.

Nature Play & Learning Places is a tool for those working in the field including advocates, policy makers, system managers, site managers, educators, program specialists, design professionals, urban planners, and developers. Seven chapters cover the following:

1. Why nature play and learning summarizes why nature play and learning is important for health and human development at the global, population, and individual levels and describes the historical precedents of community-based, children's outdoor facilities dedicated to free play and learning. The chapter provides guidance for creating and managing nature play and learning spaces in many contexts with community participation as a key element. Professionals who plan, design, and manage community environments are encouraged to include space for nature play and learning.

2. Nature play, learning, and education demonstrates how playing with and learning through nature can be a vehicle for environmental literacy and a means to advancing educational missions focused on conservation, health, stewardship, and multidisciplinary learning across science, humanities, and the arts. Stages of child development from birth to 18 are summarized and discussed in relation to design and management responses, including volunteer youth helping to manage and run programs.

3. Locating nature play and learning places discusses the idea of nature play and learning as an integral part of urban green infrastructure, at residential neighborhood level and beyond, including city, county, and regional parks; school grounds; child development centers; non-formal education institutions, including nature centers, museums, zoos, and botanical gardens; and state and federal lands.

4. Designing nature play and learning places is the core chapter and introduces affordance, activity setting, and territorial range as useful concepts, along with creation of a design and management program as a key implementation tool. Descriptions of activity settings include entrances, pathways, plants (trees, shrubs, native perennials, permanent edible landscape, vegetable gardens), natural surfacing, loose parts, natural construction, permanent play structures, multipurpose lawns, meadows, landforms/topography, animals, aquatic settings, sand/dirt settings, gathering places, program bases/outdoor storage, signage, and boundaries.

5. Managing nature play and learning places defines effective management as a tradeoff between the needs of children to engage in exuberant play and protection of natural resources from excessive wear and tear. Projects are defined as either renovation or new construction or a mix of both, often combined with ecosystem restoration. Management should be driven by ecosystem thinking to focus attention on the quality of water, soil, and plants. Depending on context (for example, public park versus botanical garden) nature play and learning places can be designed as open or controlled access offering varied ranges of play and learning programming. Governmental or nongovernmental organizations or a mix of both may manage spaces. Development may occur in phases over time as resources become available.

6. Risk management offers a risk management protocol for nature play and learning places that accomplishes the dual goals of providing a stimulating nature play environment while ensuring that children are not exposed to unreasonable risk of harm. Concepts of hazard, risk, injury, and standard of care are defined and discussed. A risk management assessment protocol for nature play and learning spaces is presented as an eight-step process emphasizing engagement of risk managers and insurers, implementation of an

inspection routine, elimination of hazards that may cause serious injury, documenting and evaluating all incidents, maintaining records of inspections and incident reports, and regular staff evaluations and systematic records of responses.

7. Implementing nature play and learning places emphasizes community-based approaches to achieving sustainability. Tools include community surveys and stakeholder workshops as the main source of project content along with participation of children in the design process. Institutions that may sponsor nature play and learning spaces are described, including parks agencies, childcare and school systems, nonformal educational institutions, and state and federal agencies. The importance of community diversity and engagement is emphasized.

Case studies gathered from across the nation, illustrate the feasibility of implementing nature play and learning spaces economically through community processes across a range of contexts.

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