

Designing And Creating Natural Play Areas For Kids



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Some trends come and go, according to the whims of the ages. Others make perfect sense on many levels. The latest trends in children's landscape design fall into the latter category. Today's designers are moving away from garish play structures arbitrarily plunked onto square beds of asphalt or mulch, and toward lush, organic habitats replete with natural elements. Monkey bars are giving way to tree houses, geometric sandboxes to irregular-shaped sandpits and water features, and the boundary lines between play spaces and the rest of the landscape are fading.



Photo: Stout Design Build

Origins of a new aesthetic

Why such a radical change? What's driving the movement toward more natural surroundings for children?

In large part, the trend reflects a general increase in awareness of and interest in the environment. The global climate crisis combined with an exploding Internet has made us all increasingly aware of how our collective and individual actions affect the planet and each other. The terms "holistic," "sustainable" and "organic" continue to gain mainstream attention and acceptance.

The landscape is, of course, a natural area for these ideas to bloom. In particular, children's landscaping is an especially appropriate venue because of another concern: the alarming rise of childhood obesity, ADHD, depression and other modern maladies. In his best-selling 2008 book "Last Child in the Woods," journalist Richard Louv coined the term "nature-deficit disorder," citing a growing body of research indicating that exposure to nature is necessary for children's healthy physical, mental and emotional development.

"It's becoming a lot more evident that people are wanting to get their children back to nature," says Holly Brooks, co-owner of King Landscaping in Atlanta, and mother of two young children. "I think it's becoming more prevalent, and I've been hearing several more requests for that style of play area."

A third factor affecting current trends in children's landscape design is the economy, including the real estate market. People are less willing to spend for pools and other extravagant features and more cognizant of maintaining the salability and resale value of their homes. Putting in a conventional playscape that will have to be replaced in a few years has become a less attractive option. Natural play areas can be installed affordably and grow with a family, and they often include sustainable features, such as native plantings and permeable surfaces, which are increasingly viewed as assets.

How natural landscaping benefits children

There is ample research that a more natural environment helps combat ADHD, obesity and other disorders, and helps kids develop proper balance and control of their bodies. North Carolina State University Professor Robin Moore, who has been researching the effects of nature on children's behavior for more than 40 years, reports anecdotal evidence that children are less stressed and get along better when they have access to naturalized outdoor areas.

"Several years ago we looked at the incident reports in a child care center pre- and post-naturalizing the outdoor environment," Moore says. "The results are not published, but what we found was a drop in disputes between the kids. We had the same result at an elementary school we worked in in North Carolina. Squabbles and serious fights dropped so dramatically that they got rid of their time-out mode; they didn't need it anymore."

In addition to teaching, Moore is a design consultant and founder of the [Natural Learning Initiative](#) (NLI), an organization founded to research and promote the importance of the natural environment, including design, to healthy childhood development. He is also the author of the NLI's recently published report "Nature Play and Learning Places," a set of national guidelines for creating and managing places where children engage with nature.



What goes into a natural play yard?

Let's look at some trending features and ideas.

Organic design elements. "Designs that lean toward the organic realm rather than the geometric tend to create more dynamic, interesting spaces, engage children for longer periods of time, and encourage movement and exploration," Moore explains.

Natural play areas tend to incorporate winding pathways, irregular and

organic shapes, and natural elements, such as stones, boulders, tree stumps and branches, along with trees, shrubs and other perennial plantings. Including elements kids can manipulate and build with keeps them engaged in the environment. Sand, as well as items such as sticks and bricks that they can use to build forts and shelters, are also good choices. Water features are extremely popular and need not be deep enough to pose a danger. Even a very small, shallow rivulet can be endlessly fascinating to young children.

Kids also need shade, especially in warmer climates. If trees are not present or are too small to provide shade, try vine teepees, arbors, pergolas, shade tents, umbrellas or playhouses. Many of these structures do double duty as private hideouts, which kids love.

Communities and ecosystems. In a conventional play yard, the play equipment dominates. There is little to offer an individual who is not actively using it. This can make adults – from teens to the elderly – bored or uncomfortable and unwilling to linger.

In contrast, naturalized play yards tend to feature a central community space, which is often a patio, fire pit or outdoor lounge that is inviting to people of all ages. The children's area occupies the periphery, whether it's curved pathways between plantings, a tree house where they can look out, hideouts carved into the shrubbery, or a climbing wall at the back of the yard. This provides teens and adults with an attractive place to relax while still keeping an eye on the little ones. The children, in turn, can engage in active play without disturbing adult activity, and have ready access to adult company when they feel the need.

Such an arrangement recognizes the continuum of human experience and places the family or community at the center rather than any one age group. This type of design can be adapted to a family's changing needs with less expense than the complete redesign often necessary when children outgrow a conventional play area.

Just as older family members are included in a naturalized play space, so is nature itself. Central to the aesthetic is to "invite in the wild" by leaving some areas intentionally unmown and not manicured. Edible plants, grasses and wildflowers also attract beneficial insects and other wildlife, so the play area becomes a kind of ecosystem of which the child is a part. Diversity is important in an ecosystem, so be sure to include a wide variety of species.

Dual-purpose features. Many of the features common to natural play areas can serve double duty in the landscape, often with environmental benefits. "A sandbox can also be used as a swale for water collection when it rains," says Tom Stout with Stout Design Build in Los Angeles. "We also did a below-grade trampoline that was in a 3-foot pit with gravel underneath. It satisfied ecological certification credits for water collection and was a fun play feature in the landscape. The other way we've gone is to make a swale into a pathway, with boulders sticking up as stepping stones."



An aesthetically pleasing rock climbing wall from King Landscaping.

Integrating traditional play yard elements into the landscape

So, does adopting a more natural aesthetic render traditional play structures obsolete? Not at all, says Stout.

“Play structures are still OK, but try to choose colors that integrate [with the landscape],” he says. “We did a project where the fire pit was opposite from the play structure. We chose a darker brown for the play structure to help it recede visually. Another technique is to extend the same mulch used in the play structure area into the planter beds. We also like to use boulders and logs around the edges of a play structure to help it transition into the landscape.”

The slope of the land can also be used to create play structures. Instead of leveling an area, try incorporating slides, climbing walls, stepping-stones and the like into the slope.

Don't discard turf. Moore recommends integrating open grassy space as an important element to encourage active play. “Set aside an area of good-quality, irrigated turf. It encourages chase games, hide and seek – all kinds of physically active games,” he explains.

Natural playscapes can even be adapted for small spaces. “You can get creative in small spaces,” Brooks says. “If you have a small space, you can go vertical. Compose a small Ewok village with platforms and ladders and trees. There's a lot of ways to do it.”

Julie Moir Messervy, head of Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS) in Saxtons River, Vermont, agrees. “Using corners, built-ins or multipurpose spaces can give kids places to play,” she says. “Letting them make forts in the shrub border or helping them plant their own little garden or choose focal points for it doesn't take up much room either. Porches are great for kids, especially if there's a swinging bench there. Chalkboards and climbing walls can be installed against a fence or garage wall. Or try a small, shallow water feature or fairy garden as a focal point.”

The future of natural landscaping for children

Unlike most trends, the movement toward natural kids' play areas has real health and social benefits. Whether or not it becomes a long-term phenomenon depends a lot on the designers, who may have to work hard at first to educate clients who are used to precisely manicured lawns and tightly controlled environments for children. Those designers who are successful will be in a position to create a true legacy with their work.

As Messervy puts it: “I expect this trend will continue as long as the Internet does, because in my experience it really works. At JMMDS, we have designed four children's gardens for different institutions and are so

pleased at the way that children and their parents and teachers use them. Designers can help in so many ways to counter nature-deficit disorder in children and also in adults. Getting kids to play, dig, plant and daydream in nature is the best antidote we can provide. Plus, it helps them become stewards of the earth as they grow older because they have experienced nature close-up."

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