

25 Easy Nature Play Ideas for Early Childhood Centers

Great nature play doesn't require elaborate and expensive play spaces! Even a limited outdoor area can be affordably enhanced for nature play, using common materials and plants to create a young child's heaven that is chock-full of small-scale wonders and magical discoveries.

Try the suggestions in this brochure, and then add your own ideas over time!



Why More Outdoor Play?

For eons children have enjoyed the outdoors as their greatest playground — climbing trees, digging holes, catching frogs, building forts, picking berries, or just running gleefully through tall grass.

These are fond memories for most adults, but unfortunately they have little to do with modern childhood. Today's children are disconnected from nature. American kids (ages 3 - 12) now spend 27 percent of their time with electronic media, versus only one percent outdoors. If you count only time for *unstructured* outdoor play — that is, play that kids make up themselves, on their own schedules — it amounts to just 30 minutes per week!

With a little planning, outdoor enrichment, and commitment, your early childhood program can easily double that weekly amount of outdoor free play! This kind of play is perfect for developing the "whole child." In fact, a growing body of research shows that frequent, unstructured play in diverse natural settings is great for:

- ♥ Social and emotional development;
- ♥ Creative development;
- ♥ Intellectual development;
- ♥ Physical fitness and overall health; and
- ♥ Creation of lasting personal bonds to the natural world.

What Makes the Best Nature Play?

Green Hearts promotes three key dimensions of great nature play.

1. **The right kind of place:** A naturalistic area where kids are free to explore, play, and relax — and even to cause a little minor damage. The "richer" the space, the better: extensive and diverse plantings, dirt piles or digging pits, water, shrub dens, vines, boulders, "secret" niches, expanses of sand, balancing logs, etc. The space doesn't need to be large, but it should be "dense" with natural features, on the small scale of young children!
2. **The right kind of play:** Truly free play, where the kids "make it up as they go." Adult supervision is fine and necessary for all child care, but adult *intervention* should be limited. Let the kids use their own imagination to create play; don't try to be their coach! If the site is naturally rich, they'll find plenty to do. And be sure to stress play *with* nature — i.e., digging, wading, picking, catching, smelling, climbing, etc. — not just play *in* nature!
3. **The right kind of *re*-play:** That is, frequency! Research finds that the greatest impacts of nature play come when it is a regular part of children's lives. Early childhood centers have the perfect opportunity to provide that frequency, since kids return to your site day after day. Even a small play area can offer a powerful experience of nature for your young children!

For more ideas and understanding, visit www.greenheartsinc.org. Be sure to check out our "Parents' Guide to Nature Play." Also, please consider Green Hearts for a keynote address or workshop about nature play at your next early childhood conference!

Ideas You Can Do!

Outside Door

Use it — more than you already do, in all safe weather conditions!

Water

Kids love water play! Provide water from multiple sources, if possible: a hose, a faucet, a sprinkler, a rotating sprayer, a rain barrel, a hand pump, or even just spray bottles.



Water Transport

Part of the fun of water play is moving it around! Use watering cans, buckets, hollow bamboo poles, plastic pipe (with curves & connectors), plastic gutter sections, pots and pans, recycled milk jugs, etc. You can get the water from a faucet or hose, or use rain barrels to collect it.

Digging Pit

Just plain dirt, going down — plus kid-sized shovels. If you have heavy clay soil, you may want to lighten it by mixing in a few bags of sand or mulch. Pea gravel or plain mulch can also be used for digging pits. *Note:* Dirt digging pits will miraculously turn into mud puddles after a rain. Your kids won't mind a bit — but be sure to forewarn their parents!

Dirt Pile

Just plain dirt, going up. The larger the pile, the more fun and creative play your kids will have. It will inevitably get muddy and messy — and your kids will have even more fun!



Leaf Pile

If you're lucky enough to have large deciduous trees nearby, rake the fallen leaves into giant piles and let the kids have at 'em! Better yet, let your kids do the raking — they'll love it! The good memories will last longer than the leaves.

Sand

Lots of it! — contained by shrubs, landscape timbers, old tires used as planters, boardwalks, whatever. The more sand, the better! Avoid small commercial sand boxes, which don't have much magic to them. Have a source of water nearby, or a handy way for kids to take water to the sand — since sand becomes *really* great for artistic play when it's wet! (*Note:* Check with your license inspectors about requirements for covering your sand area at night. Sometimes landscape-scale sand areas have less burdensome cover requirements than smaller sand boxes.)

Plants! Lots of Plants! Everywhere!

Grow plants in beds, in giant pots, in window boxes, in old tires, and vining up trellises and trees. Choose plants for species diversity, various colors, different heights and textures, and strong fragrances. Have the kids help plant and care for them. Raised garden beds can help protect young or more fragile plants from active preschooler play.

And if you don't have a good shade tree, buy the largest one you can afford and have it planted by the pros. Use a hardy, native species; protect it from harsh play until it is established; and don't compact the soil over the root zone. It will take years to become a great play tree, but the sooner you get it growing....

Vegetable Garden

Choose vegies that will ripen during your school season — either rapidly in the spring (like peas, radishes) or ones that will be ready in late summer. (If you operate year-round, this is no issue.) Good possibilities include potatoes, sugar snap peas, corn, carrots, and cherry tomatoes. Use planting beds, giant pots, or both. If you have a sunny window sill, you can start most veggie seeds inside during late winter or early spring, and then transplant them outside after last frost. If garden care is needed during vacations, ask one family to voluntarily tend the garden each week until school re-opens.





Pumpkin Patch

Pumpkins are unique enough to merit their own category! They are not hard to grow, but they benefit from lots of rich compost or plenty of fertilizer, and they won't mature until fall. Pumpkin vines need plenty of room to run, but you only need two or three plants. (No need to grow a separate pumpkin for each child!)

Butterfly Garden

Plant a jumbled selection of insect-attracting flowers, both annuals and perennials. Ask your local garden center for help in choosing good plants, or research this on the internet. Don't forget food plants for the caterpillar life stage, like ones from the parsley family. (Note: your local Extension Service is an excellent source for advice about plants. Their Master Gardeners may even help you establish your gardens, since they are committed to volunteer community service. Ask!)

Milkweed and Monarchs

Milkweed inevitably attracts Monarch butterfly caterpillars, as it is the only thing that they eat! The caterpillars (easy to identify with a field guide or the internet) can be collected by cutting a branch they're on, and then placing them (with the branch) into a screened box (about the size of a ten-ream paper box). Keep the box supplied with fresh milkweed leaves until the caterpillars turn into chrysalises (usually in less than a week). There must be a bare twig or two leaning up in the box, from which the chrysalises can hang in open air.

After 9 to 14 days an adult butterfly will break out of the now-transparent chrysalis. Be sure there is enough room in the box for its wings to fully open, so they won't be deformed — and then release the adult within a few hours. This is a *truly* magical process for children to see! (Note: Swamp milkweed from a nursery is prettier than the Common milkweed that grows wild everywhere, and it works just as well.)

Logs

Just lay one or more large logs on the ground for balancing, sitting, and hiding. Stake them in place or partially bury them, so they can't roll unexpectedly. Lay several together in an end-to-end zig-zag to produce a nice challenge course! (But have a soft fall surface around them, just in case.) Tree care services are a good source for logs from trees they have had to cut. They might even be sweet-talked into free delivery!

Tunnels

You can make a simple tunnel by burying a culvert pipe under a mound of dirt; put a layer of sand inside for comfort. You can also create tunnels by growing gourds, beans, or other vines over a row of store-bought trellis arches. For a different sort of living tunnel, plant willow "whips" (cut, straight stems) in parallel lines, and tie the tops together as they grow. Most species of willows will grow well from stems that are cut during their dormant winter months, stuck firmly into soil (cut end down), and kept moist until they start growing. Willow stems are flexible when young, so it's easy to shape them with twine, wire, or posts.

Shrubs

They often grow faster than trees, and seem almost as giant to young children's eyes! Plant shrubs in groups to create nooks and niches, or in rows along a narrow pathway. Choose some evergreen varieties (if viable in your area), and include species with flowers and berries that will attract insects and birds. Use arching or weeping varieties to create hide-aways under their branches or when planted along a wall or fence.

Rocks and Boulders

Let your kids build with rocks that are small enough to carry around, but too large to throw. Larger, smooth boulders (beach ball size or bigger) can be great for climbing and pretend play — either singly, or in a jumbled "boulder mountain." If you don't naturally have large rocks on your site, you can buy them and have them delivered — but carefully choose their permanent locations in advance!

Play Stream

A good approach for preschools is to create a small, inches-deep stream that flows only when you turn on the water. Dig a very shallow, sloping stream bed, and fit a heavy pond liner (available at most garden centers) into it. Cover the bed with gravel and larger cobblestones which kids can use to create dams and channels. Put a hand-activated water source (like a hose!) at the top. Since re-circulating or standing water is usually a no-no with licensing, have your stream drain into a rain garden (basically a miniature marsh). If you can't (or don't want to) use real water, make a dry "stream" out of a twisting gravel and stone bed. Include a small bridge, and add plants along the stream's edge for more interest.

Seating



Kids use small seats for talking with a friend, looking at books, daydreaming, or just plain resting. Use a variety: benches, bench swings, kid-size Adirondack chairs, hammocks, hammock chairs, rockers, boulders, stumps, logs, etc. Locate some of them in intimate, sheltered spots, ideally with overhead shade.

Hills and Berms

Children love small, grassy hills that they can roll down, charge up, sled on, hide behind, or use for "king of the mountain." If you have such a slope, plant it with a tough, hardy turf grass and keep it clear for uninhibited play. A preschool hill doesn't need to be huge — even just four or five feet high will do — and it can be either a conical "bump" or a longer, serpentine berm. If you don't already have varied topography in your play space, you'll need a lot of soil and heavy equipment to create a good play hill. Ask a builder, garden center, or landscaper for help!

Adventure Paths

Create very narrow, meandering routes through tall grass, between boulders, or just connecting two activity areas. Use small stepping stones, "tree cookies" (log slices), wood planks, etc. — or just dirt or mulch. If the path leads into a "secret" nook, all the better!

Discovery Board

Lay a piece of scrap plywood, roughly 2 feet square, on the ground in a quiet, vegetated corner of your play area. Leave it for a couple of days, and then periodically check to see what's moved into the micro-habitat underneath — like pill bugs, ants, slugs, millipedes, and other mini-beasts with kid appeal! Always put the board back in the same spot. (Note: It's best to skip this idea if poisonous snakes are common in your area, as they might choose to rest under the board on hot days.)

Loose Parts for Outdoor Construction Play

Use small logs, large wooden blocks, boards, branches, and tree cookies. Sand the edges and corners of these to avoid splinters. Also use sticks, milk crates, tarps, sheets of cardboard, blankets, pine cones, corn stalks, reeds, etc. Do not use chemically treated lumber.



Tools and Toys

Keep handy a variety of tools and toys to help kids explore and play with nature — e.g., insect nets, bug houses, magnifiers, binoculars, spades, scoopers, sieves, colanders, buckets, rakes, small plastic containers, pots and pans, watering cans, etc.

Bird Houses

Kids like to watch nest building activity, and then see (and hear) the babies! Not all bird houses are alike, though; swallow, wren, or bluebird boxes are usually good choices. Get building instructions and advice from a nature center or the internet, including where to mount the houses and how high. Site them wisely, as they can produce messy droppings below.

A Change of Clothes

Good nature play means that kids will occasionally get muddy and wet! Keep a change of clothes handy for each child. Plastic bags can also be helpful for keeping wet kids from soaking car seats on their way home.



Green Hearts is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to restoring and strengthening the bonds between children and nature. We speak, write, teach, and consult about the power of nature play and how it can be returned to childhood. We are also currently developing our first children's nature center, in Papillion, NE.

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