



What is a Nature Playground

- A nature playground combines play equipment with natural elements, including wood, logs, stones, sand, water, plants/trees, soft ground (such as earth, mulch, or grass), and loose natural materials (like sticks, leaves, or mud), rather than relying on traditional metal/plastic slides and swings.
- Sometimes called “playscapes,” these spaces are designed to feel like part of the landscape — often resembling a forest, meadow, creek-side, or garden more than a playground.
- The emphasis is on **open-ended, child-directed, exploratory play** rather than structured, prescriptive play patterns.



Benefits of Nature Playgrounds (for Daycare / Kids)

• More Active & Varied Physical Play

- Children on natural playgrounds tend to be **more physically active** than on traditional plastic/metal ones.
- The variety — logs to balance on, natural slopes/rocks, sand, water — encourages **climbing, balancing, running, digging, jumping, crawling**, and other gross-motor activities that support coordination, strength, and flexibility.
- Rich Sensory & Multi-Sensory Experiences
- Nature playgrounds engage **all the senses**: sight (trees, plants, changing seasons), sound (wind, water, leaves), touch (wood, bark, sand, soil), smell (plants, earth), and even occasional taste if edible plants/herbs are included. This sensory richness supports **cognitive development**, sensory integration, and helps children explore and understand their environment more deeply.
- Stimulates Imagination, Creativity & Problem-Solving
- Without fixed “ways to play,” kids invent games: using branches/sticks to build forts, combining sand and water, coloring nature scenes, exploring “what ifs.” This **open-ended play** fosters creativity, imagination, and even rudimentary engineering or construction thinking. They can role-play, experiment, and test ideas — giving greater cognitive and creative flexibility vs. repetitive playground equipment use.

• Encourages Social Interaction, Cooperation & Inclusion

- Because natural playgrounds often have shared “loose parts” (rocks, water, sand, sticks), children tend to **cooperate, share, collaborate** — building together, negotiating roles, solving collective problems. [The Kavanagh Report+2BC Recreation and Parks Association+2](#)
- The open and variable environment tends to attract groups — and supports social learning, communication, teamwork, and sometimes community involvement (if parents/staff engage with the design). [Wild Child Nature Play+1](#)

• Emotional and Mental Health Benefits

- Being outdoors, exposed to fresh air and natural surroundings, helps reduce stress, anxiety, and hyperactivity; promotes calmness and better mood in children. The variability and naturalness of the environment also provide a sense of wonder, connection to nature, grounding, and can foster environmental respect and awareness from a young age.

• Encourages Environmental Awareness & Appreciation

- Through direct contact with plants, soil, insects, rocks, water — children develop familiarity with the ecosystem, learn about nature, seasons, biodiversity, and responsibility toward the environment.
- This early exposure can help build long-term respect for the environment, sustainability, and caring attitudes toward nature. • Promotes Risk Assessment, Resilience & Self-Confidence
- The unstructured, sometimes challenging features (balance on logs, climbing rocks, digging/splashing in water) allow children to evaluate risk, test boundaries, and learn what they can do, which develops resilience, self-awareness, and confidence. This form of play can help children better understand their limits and capabilities, which supports safer risk-taking and decision-making skills.
- • Longer Engagement and Less Boredom
- Natural playgrounds tend to hold children's interest longer than traditional fixed-structure playgrounds. Because there's more variety and things that change (weather, seasons, natural growth, loose materials), kids return again and again to explore different things.
- This prolonged interest can encourage more frequent outdoor play and reduce sedentary behaviors.



Design Principles & Considerations for Nature Playgrounds

If you're considering building a nature playground (e.g., for a daycare), these design ideas maximize benefits:

- Use **natural materials**: wood, logs, stones, sand, water, soil, plants — ideally locally sourced and non-toxic.
- Provide **variability and open-ended spaces**: open ground for running, hills or slopes, logs, water or sand areas, loose parts to manipulate.
- Design for **sensory richness**: include plants for smell, water/earth for touch, areas for listening (leaves, rustle, water), and varied textures (wood, stone, sand).
- Include **spaces for collaborative play**: building, digging, water play, and rock-moving, which encourage sharing, cooperation, and group problem-solving.
- Ensure **safety and supervision**: though natural playgrounds encourage exploration and risk, surfaces like soft earth, wood chips, mulch — rather than concrete — help cushion falls.
- Make it **inclusive and accessible**, so children of different ages and abilities can enjoy and benefit (ramps, varied levels, safe zones, shade).