

# ***Children's Outdoor Play & Learning Environments: Returning to Nature***

**By Randy White & Vicki Stoecklin**

## **The Importance of Nature to Children**

Studies have provided convincing evidence that the way people feel in pleasing natural environments improves recall of information, creative problem solving, and creativity.<sup>19</sup> Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder. Wonder is important as it a motivator for life long learning. There is also strong evidence that young children respond more positively to experiences in the outdoors than adults as they have not yet adapted to unnatural, man-made, indoor environments.

The natural world is essential to the emotional health of children. Just as children need positive adult contact and a sense of connection to the wider human community, they also need positive contact with nature and the chance for solitude and the sense of wonder that nature offers. When children play in nature they are more likely to have positive feelings about each other and their surroundings.

Outdoor environments are also important to children's development of independence and autonomy. Outdoor space allows children to gradually experiment with increasing distance from their caretaker. While the development of greater independence from toddlerhood to middle childhood can happen within the confines of indoor spaces, safe space outdoors greatly adds to the ability of children to naturally experiment with independence and separation, and the adult's willingness to trust the child's competence which is essential for separation to happen. This is particularly important for children who live in small and crowded homes.

## **Children's Experience with the Natural World**

Children's outdoor play is different from time spent indoors. The sensory experiences are different, and different standards of play apply. Activities which may be frowned on indoors can be safely tolerated outdoors. Children have greater freedom not only to run and shout, but also to interact with and manipulate the environment. Children are free to do 'messy' activities outdoors that won't be tolerated indoors.

Natural outdoor environments have three qualities that are unique and appealing to children as play environments - their unending diversity; the fact that they are not created by adults; and their feeling of timelessness - the landscapes, trees, rivers described in fairy tales and myths still exist today.

Children experience the natural environment differently than adults. Adults typically see nature as background for what they are doing. Children experience nature, not as background for events, but rather as a stimulator and experiential component of their activities. The world of nature is not a scene or even a landscape. Nature for the child is sheer sensory experience. Children judge the natural setting not by its aesthetics, but rather by how they can interact with the environment.

Children have a unique, direct and experiential *way of knowing* the natural world as a place of beauty, mystery and wonder. Children's special affinity for the natural environment is connected to the child's development and his or her way of knowing.

Plants, together with soil, sand, and water, provide settings that can be manipulated. You can build a trench in the sand and dirt or a rock dam over a stream, but there's not much you can do to a jungle gym except climb, hang, or fall off. Natural elements provide for open-ended play that emphasize unstructured creative exploration with diverse materials. The high levels of complexity and variety nature offers invites longer and more complex play. Because of their interactive properties, plants stimulate discovery, dramatic pretend play, and imagination. Plants speak to all of the senses, so it's not surprising that children are closely attuned to environments with vegetation. Plants, in a pleasant environment with a mix of sun, shade, color, texture, fragrance, and softness of enclosure also encourage a sense of peacefulness. Natural settings offer qualities of openness, diversity, manipulation, exploration, anonymity and wildness.

All the manufactured equipment and all the indoor instructional materials produced by the best educators in the world cannot substitute for the primary experience of hands-on engagement with nature. They cannot replace the sensory moment where a child's attention is captured by the phenomena and materials of nature: the dappled sparkle of sunlight through leaves, the sound and motion of plants in the wind, the sight of butterflies or a colony of ants, the imaginative worlds of a square yard of dirt or sand, the endless sensory experience of water, the infinite space in an iris flower.

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- *1988 Graduate Study, Wheelock College, Boston, MA*
- *1985 Graduate Study, Illinois State University, Normal, IL*
- *1981 Master's Degree, Southern Illinois University, Major: Education*
- *1974 Bachelor's Degree, Southern Illinois University, Major: Education*

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- *Management Training, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1985*
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