



# Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

## Where Wonder Awaits: Authentic Nature Play Environments

Our work to provide excellent care and education for young children requires inspiration and intentionality. Let's work together with this mindset to design spaces and support experiences that help children make authentic connections with nature.

### Connecting Our Children with Mother Earth

**Barb Carlson, Canada**

As a child I spent most of my free time outside playing, fishing, climbing trees, exploring swamps, and chasing butterflies and frogs. These experiences formed a core part of my identity and my relationship with nature has only become stronger throughout my life. When I am in nature, I feel reconnected with my childhood self and all of the wonder of discovery and the thrill of the unexpected. I am a whole person because my childhood experience was an investment in adulthood. This fuels my passion to connect children to the land.

In my role as early childhood education instructor, I provide my students with opportunities to experience nature and reconnect them with their childhood memories of being outside. When we go ice fishing, cook food on a campfire, or hike a nature trail, the pressures and routines of everyday life slip away with the beauty of birdsong or the unexpected scurry of a flushed rabbit. Connecting with nature makes us childlike and this sense of curiosity and adventure is a source of meaning. Every child should grow into an adult who can instantly access this rich sense of place and belonging.

In 2014, I took forest and nature practitioner training at FortWhyte Alive, an environmental and education center in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was a tremendous gift and offered me another opportunity to connect children with nature. I ran a week-long forest and nature program with preschool children. Each day we walked through the boreal forest and spent the day building forts, sliding, hiking and discovering animal tracks.

This experience encouraged me to advocate for a forest and nature program for kindergarten children. The program I helped develop allows children to build their relationship with the land as they plant gardens and explore the forest on a regular basis. Indigenous elders and teachers play a key role in the program by demonstrating local knowledge and cultural teachings. It is a program rooted in place.

Read more at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/forest-nature-outdoor-daycare-program-northern-manitoba-1.4460990>

*Carlson is an early childhood education instructor and has worked in the child care field for over 40 years. She is a long time member of the Manitoba Child Care Association.*



*The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.*

[WorldForumFoundation.org/nature](http://WorldForumFoundation.org/nature)

### Future issues of Wonder

Do you have an idea or story to share? We invite you to email your ideas, stories and photos that relate to Connecting Children with Nature to Tina Reeble: [tinar@natureexplore.org](mailto:tinar@natureexplore.org)

Consider this:

- What are professional development opportunities that can offer you inspiration and practical suggestions for your work in connecting children to the natural world?
- What can you add or change in your outdoor space to make it more naturally authentic?

### Defining Outdoor Play Environments

Fionna Robbé, Australia

As the populations of cities increase globally, so has the demand for an increased number of child care facilities in denser urban centers. The burgeoning higher real estate prices and scarcity of land have driven many child care providers to establish early learning centers in the upper floors of buildings (as opposed to the ground level).

An increasing amount of centers are providing simulated outdoor environments in indoor settings, due to the difficulty in finding buildings with sufficient suitable outdoor space. Buildings often have not been specifically planned for child care services, and policies and regulations have loopholes when defining how outdoor areas for childcare facilities are defined. Regulations commonly define how much unencumbered outdoor space is needed per child (e.g. 7m<sup>2</sup> is required in Australia), but it is taken for granted that it is understood what outdoor space means. More often, sterile simulations are receiving approval by authorities.

Simulated outdoor environments are often highly contrived: artificial lighting, air conditioning and synthetic turf create the landscape, with raised sandpits and plants in planter boxes or tubs. Walls and glazing form the boundaries, supplemented with timber elements. While this can be designed tastefully, often the spaces are pragmatic and stark. The resulting “landscape” usually lacks authenticity, and the result is tokenism.

The value of children interacting with authentic natural environments has been well established worldwide, with countless research papers and facts supporting this. Indeed, this vital childhood experience is what drives requirements such as the 7m<sup>2</sup> of unencumbered outdoor space per child mentioned above.

It is now essential to define “outdoor play environment” and “nature play” with some urgency.

These definitions need to be embedded in national regulations, codes, standards, planning policies, and local authority devel-



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opment control plans. Without these definitions, regulatory and approving authorities have no means by which to critically determine concepts put forward for development approval.

The definition of “outdoor play environment” is currently being debated in Australia, and the following criteria are becoming relevant:

- The direct experience of seasonal weather on a daily basis.
- Deep soil (sufficient depth to grow a tree) being required for a minimum area.

- The ability for animals such as birds, ants, or beetles to inhabit or frequent the area.
- A space which is external to buildings.

“Nature play” equally needs definition, and the following criteria may be helpful:

- Play elements and settings consisting of natural non-manufactured items including (but not limited to) logs, branches, boulders, living plant materials, natural surface materials (e.g. sands, mulch, soil) and water.
- Preference for materials in their natural state such as logs, stumps and branches rather than milled and dressed timber.
- Children are given cues and invitations to directly explore and interact with the natural elements and settings.

Once definitions are provided in policy documents and regulations, further guidance on design parameters and safety guidelines are needed to support the definitions. There are many of these published already, but the important point is that we need to start the conversation with definitions, or many of these documents can be overlooked or, worse, ignored.

There is urgency to these definitions becoming embedded in policy, due to the precedents currently being set. It is our collective responsibility, and the time to act is now!

*Fiona Robbé is a landscape architect and horticulturalist specializing in the design of outdoor children's environments.*

Consider this:

- Using the criteria for an outdoor play environment and nature play listed above, how does your space compare?
- What are some ways that you can lobby government and regulatory bodies to include these definitions at the highest level possible?