

Natural Play Areas

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I never had any idea how fortunate my siblings and I were growing up in southeast Ohio. We had free reign of the fields, ravines, woods, and a creek. Our parents never wondered where we were because they knew we couldn't get into much trouble. We played house on the flat sandstone rocks in the pine forest, caught minnows in the creek, and made paths through the dense tangle of trees. Our mother rang the giant bell as the signal to come home after we spent too much time outside, or when it was time to eat dinner.

Does this sound familiar? As a park naturalist working in Columbus, it is my job to educate park visitors and participants about outreach programs. I have asked this question to many adults and usually get head nods from older program participants. But not from younger parents or the children they bring.

Many children today never learn how to play outside, given all the choices of electronic devices and indoor activities. Yes, people go outside. They play sports, take nature walks with a group leader, or have picnics. But our lives are overstructured; there is little opportunity where a child's imagination can be free. Structured versus unstructured play is a constant battle waged by educators. This was a difficult concept, especially for those of us who make a living educating

people about the world around them. You must stay in a line, on the path, and by gosh! Do not pick up that bug off the ground! Parents are afraid to let their children wander too far. It's a reasonable fear and is derived from concerns about strangers, germs, wild animals, and more.

In 2005, Richard Louv wrote *Last Child in the Woods*. He coined the term nature-deficit disorder and called attention to the lack of interaction of children and nature. The concepts were not new, they just needed revisited. Many people were inspired by his writings and grassroots organizations began all over the country. Ohio currently has five regional campaigns for the national organization Children and Nature Network. These campaigns are supported by parks, environmental organizations, child advocacy groups, health organizations, and nutrition groups.

A space was needed for children (and adults) to have meaningful experiences in nature on an unstructured level. Studies show that unstructured play experiences in nature at a young age have positive effects on a person's view of nature as an adult. Unstructured, natural play decreases stress, reduces symptoms of ADHD, and can help lower body mass index (BMI) in children.





WHAT IS A NATURAL PLAY AREA?

Five Rivers MetroParks in Dayton had already developed a few areas for nature play. Staff with the Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks visited their areas and invited them to speak at a conference. We had many questions.

Should we use technology to enhance the experience in the natural play area? Do we take children on guided walks through the space? Would the forest be destroyed? Questions grew as the committee worked on how to implement these concepts. Since its beginning, Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks has had a stay on the trail policy to protect the parks for future visitors. Changing that was a new way of thinking for the district. In 2008, five Metro Parks picked locations for natural play areas.

The areas aren't mowed or paved and there is little management. Signs were made, the areas opened, and much to our surprise no one really utilized them. It was as if people had forgotten or never had the chance to play in the woods. People did not know what to do. We worked harder on promotions. We began offering public programs emphasizing natural play area adventures. Fort building, GPS treasure hunts, game playing, fairy house building, and general nature exploration were some of the topics offered. They were wildly popular! People began to learn about the areas. Trails were created by the users and it was evident they were successful.

On occasion I venture into the play area at my park to see what visitors used. Some of the things I see include forts, little fairy and bug houses, pathways, and dams built across the creek. This is the case at all of the metro parks' natural play areas. People are using them on their own! Success!

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Nature is everywhere, regardless of where you live, work, or play. You just have to open your eyes to see it and maybe look at it through the eyes of a child. Left to their own devices, children will find something to do, whether it is drawing in the dirt with a stick, building a fairy house, or building a dam. You don't have to venture far into the wilderness to have a natural play experience. Many parks have set areas aside for people to play. Parks and other natural areas are a free or cheap way to explore nature. Take advantage of them.

Do not let the season or weather stop your adventures. There is no bad weather; just bad gear. Cheap ponchos and rain boots are attitude-savers on a rainy-day hike. Winter offers a whole new set of activities – more than just sledding!

Some children require more active play such as running, climbing, or building. Others quietly play, follow an insect, or read. That is what unstructured play is all about; child-guided choices for risk-taking and exploration. Remember, you do not have to know everything about nature. No worries about species of trees, insects, or flowers. Let children imagine and wonder on their own. Take a child out to explore and let them guide you on their own adventure. Contact your nearest metropark and inquire about natural play areas. Be that person. You can do it! 🍷

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Children and Nature Network
childrenandnature.org

provides excellent information and links to research documents

Columbus & Franklin County Metro Parks (Central Ohio)
metroparks.net

check out the natural play area information

Last Child in the Woods
by Richard Louv

Nature's Playground
by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield

Teaching Kids to Love the Earth
by Marina Lachecki Herman

